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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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A Note from the Editor

WHEN SCOTT ABEL approached me in 2019 about covering the "information-enabled enterprise" as an *Intercom* issue theme, I wasn't sure where the focus would end up. I'm personally very excited about, and invested in, the concept of information-enabled enterprises—*my* concept, *my* definition, and *my* vision of what that phrase means. I have no illusions that *my* definition is *everyone's* definition.

The concept comprises a broad and deep collection of ideas held by an eclectic community, including some who would likely disagree vehemently that technical writers have anything to do with successfully implementing those ideas. I admit, in the beginning I had some doubts about the concept as an *Intercom* issue theme.

Because I've seen—and personally been a part of—Scott's content curation and orchestration magic in the past through Content Wrangler productions, I suspended disbelief and trusted him to bring it. And bring it, he did.

When I read the articles Scott sent me, I experienced varying degrees of curiosity, wonder, excitement, and validation. I agreed more with some ideas than others. I even changed my mind about some things. All in all, the experience was just as I would expect one defined by Scott to be: An exhilarating ride through both known and new ideas, discussed in new ways, presented in an unfolding story, and resulting in deep thought, new perspectives, and entertaining learning.

I'm not going to toss out any spoilers. You need to buckle in and enjoy the ride for yourself to get the maximum effect. I'm just going to introduce you to Scott and the issue beyond the features.

Who *Is* Scott Abel?

Given Scott's reputation, I wonder if much introduction is necessary, and his LinkedIn profile describes his many achievements. Instead of discussing all of the things that Scott is—in Co-Active coaching parlance—*do*-ing, I'll try to describe who Scott is *be*-ing, at least in my experience. I've known Scott for a couple of decades. In my experience, he is the consummate curator, connector, and go-giver.

He is endlessly curious about people (especially content people), the world, and how things work. His deep desire to learn causes him to collect and curate a *lot* of stuff.

His brain is wired to connect everything that he's curated, including people and ideas. If you've found yourself inside his sphere of influence, you have likely felt the natural, organic drive behind that curation and connection.

Most striking, though, is Scott's go-giver generosity. Many of the accomplishments listed in his LinkedIn profile are gifts to the technical communication community—given without what we would likely think of as traditional compensation: His webinar show, his conference presentations, his column in *Intercom*, and the time and effort he spent on this issue. Yes, he is getting visibility, but from my personal conversations with him and the generosity with which he has shared ideas and offered support, that does not seem to be his primary motivation. He cares deeply about the technical communication community. In this issue, we see one fruit of that

passion, resulting from his natural tendencies for curation, connection, and giving.

Thank you, Scott, for bringing together this important issue, and to all of the feature authors who contributed their time and energy: Salim Ismail, Rahel Bailie, Sarah O'Keefe, Megan Gilhooly, Mark Lewis, Tim Ludwig, Kevin Nichols, Val Swisher, and Regina Preciado.

Also in This Issue

While I suspect you come to *Intercom* for the features, if you're anything like me, you have a favorite column or two, as well. As always, we have a great column lineup for you:

- In *Student Perspectives*, Akshata Balghare shares a perspective on the risks—and our responsibilities—of communicating during crisis, using the current COVID-19 pandemic as a case in point, in "The Risks of Risk Communication During a Pandemic."
- Michelle Corbin tackles another timely topic—burnout—in *Editing Matters*, providing thoughts and tips for taking care of yourself in "When You're Weary: Avoiding Editing Burnout"—an important message as we approach the end of a year in this pandemic and face the uncertain timing of "a light at the end of the tunnel."
- In *The Academic Conversation*, Tom Barker presents an example of, and makes a case for, the value of knowledge mobilization in "Connecting with Research: Knowledge Mobilization and Social Media"—an interesting contribution to the information enablement discussion around this issue's theme.
- Directly contributing to this issue's theme, Cruce Saunders' *Content Technologies* column tackles the sweeping topic of the content services organization, including what it is and its role in intelligent content and information enablement, in "The Content Services Organization: Powering the Information-Enabled Enterprise."

Also in this issue is a heart-felt article by Linda Oestreich and De Murr to memorialize Sherri Smith (27 October 1944–9 September 2020), STC Fellow and beloved leader from STC Houston. Thank you, Linda and De. We will miss you, Sherri.

Many enterprises have embraced information enablement, but the vast majority are not there, yet. I encourage you to dig into this issue and consider how you and your team can use technical communication skills, processes, tools, and expertise to help your organization move forward in this critical area. As always, reach out to authors, columnists, and me to discuss!

Until next time: To your information-enabled success!

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Information-Enabled Organizations: Building Content Capabilities to Support Exponential Growth

BY SCOTT ABEL | *STC Associate Fellow*

A NEW BREED of institutional organism is changing the way you live and work. They're called Exponential Organizations, and they are 10 times better, faster, and cheaper to run than others. They're capable of scaling their operations at many times the rate of traditional companies, using considerably fewer resources.

In this issue of *Intercom*, I bring together a group of internationally acclaimed thinkers and practitioners to discuss the changing future of organizations and the role that information will play in their exponential growth. This issue's focus, information enablement, is a little-known and infrequently used term that means something different to everyone you ask.

For our purposes, an *information-enabled organization* is one that can put its information and data to use for any business purpose, on demand and at scale. That's a lofty goal that requires us to develop a suite of information-based capabilities powered by accelerating technologies. It isn't easy, and it doesn't happen overnight.

In This Issue

In "Information Enablement and Exponential Growth," sought-after strategist and best-selling author Salim Ismail introduces the information-enabled enterprise concept and shares three ways that companies become information-enabled. Ismail, the cofounder of Singularity University, has spent the past few years studying organizations that grow exponentially, and he highlights the scalable capabilities needed for businesses to survive and thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

In "ContentOps as Information Enablement for Exponential Growth," content operations guru and STC Fellow Rahel Anne Bailie challenges us to understand that exponential growth means not only changing how we produce content but also transforming our organizations. Bailie makes the case for acknowledging that digital transformation "is not a trivial effort or cosmetic change. It's a metamorphosis in the same way that a caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly." She points out a natural synergy between the methods used in the production of technical documentation and the needs of organizations that aspire to grow exponentially. Bailie says, "Technical communicators have been scaling content production for years, using more and more sophisticated tools and techniques."

Megan Gilhooly builds on the topic of scalability in "Lessons Learned from the Trenches: Understanding How Organizations Scale," her from-the-trenches interview with executive coach and *Harvard Business Review* columnist Karen Walker, who shares her knowledge and experience helping global organizations to scale. Gilhooly documents the three essential things that Walker says technical communication teams must do to produce content at scale.

Also on the subject of scalability, technical documentation maven and content strategy expert Sarah O'Keefe helps us understand why organizations invest in building scalable content production capabilities in "Investing in Scalability: The Capability That Helps You Remove Friction from Your Content Lifecycle." "As an organization grows," O'Keefe says, "so too does the need for scalable content operations. Failing to develop the capabilities needed to scale content production can result in your organization falling behind, unable to meet the needs of the prospects you hope to convert and the customers you aim to serve."

Selling the need to develop new capabilities is challenging if you don't focus your pitch on the right things, as intelligent content consultant Mark Lewis describes in "Selling the Value of Capability to Leaders." In it, he shares with us his "huge mistake" attempting to gain approval for funding from management: "If I had focused on selling him a capability that mapped to his desire to bring in

more revenue (the result he cares about), he might not have dismissed my request abruptly." Lewis's lesson learned: "Don't waste time trying to sell the solution. Sell the capability to adapt. Sell the ability to adjust as an enterprise capability, a scalable capacity that spans departments."

Far too often, technical communicators speak in a language that's foreign to business leaders. While we claim to be masters of communication, we tend to miss the mark when it comes to selling the value of the changes we'd like to see. Copywriter Tim Ludwig shares his thoughts on how to clearly communicate the value of capabilities when making the business case to leaders—especially when asking for money—in "Selling the Value of Content Deliverability: Translating 'Tech Comm Speak' for Decision Makers."

Enterprise content strategy expert and member of the Consortium of Personalization Professionals Kevin Nichols explores content personalization—an ability nearly every organization today needs—in "Content Personalization Provides Valuable Capabilities Across the Enterprise." Nichols provides a solid overview of the benefits an organization can expect when developing personalized content experiences at scale. He helps us understand how to better explain the value of personalization by providing three use case examples.

Global content strategy master Val Swisher and experienced technical communicator and content strategy whiz Regina Lynn Preciado provide us with a quick lesson on personalization in "Quick Lesson: The Key to Delivering Personalized Content Experiences at Scale." They share the secret recipe for personalizing content at scale by exploring the subject of their new book, *The Personalization Paradox*. Their ideas might initially seem counterintuitive, but once you understand how the five dimensions of standardization allow for personalization, it all makes perfect sense.

Many Thanks

Long before anyone heard of COVID-19, I proposed this theme and agreed to guest-edit this issue and curate content from knowledgeable contributors. As it turns out, recruiting and managing content production projects can be difficult under the best circumstances. Competing priorities often get in the way of contributors meeting deadlines. Sometimes unexpected things happen.

To pull this issue together, this issue's contributors overcame various personal and public obstacles—everything from irritating inconveniences, like intermittent power and internet outages, to disaster-related emergencies, like evacuations due to hurricanes and raging wildfires.

I want to thank our contributors for making this issue of *Intercom* a reality. Your unswerving willingness to share your knowledge and expertise with our readers is appreciated.

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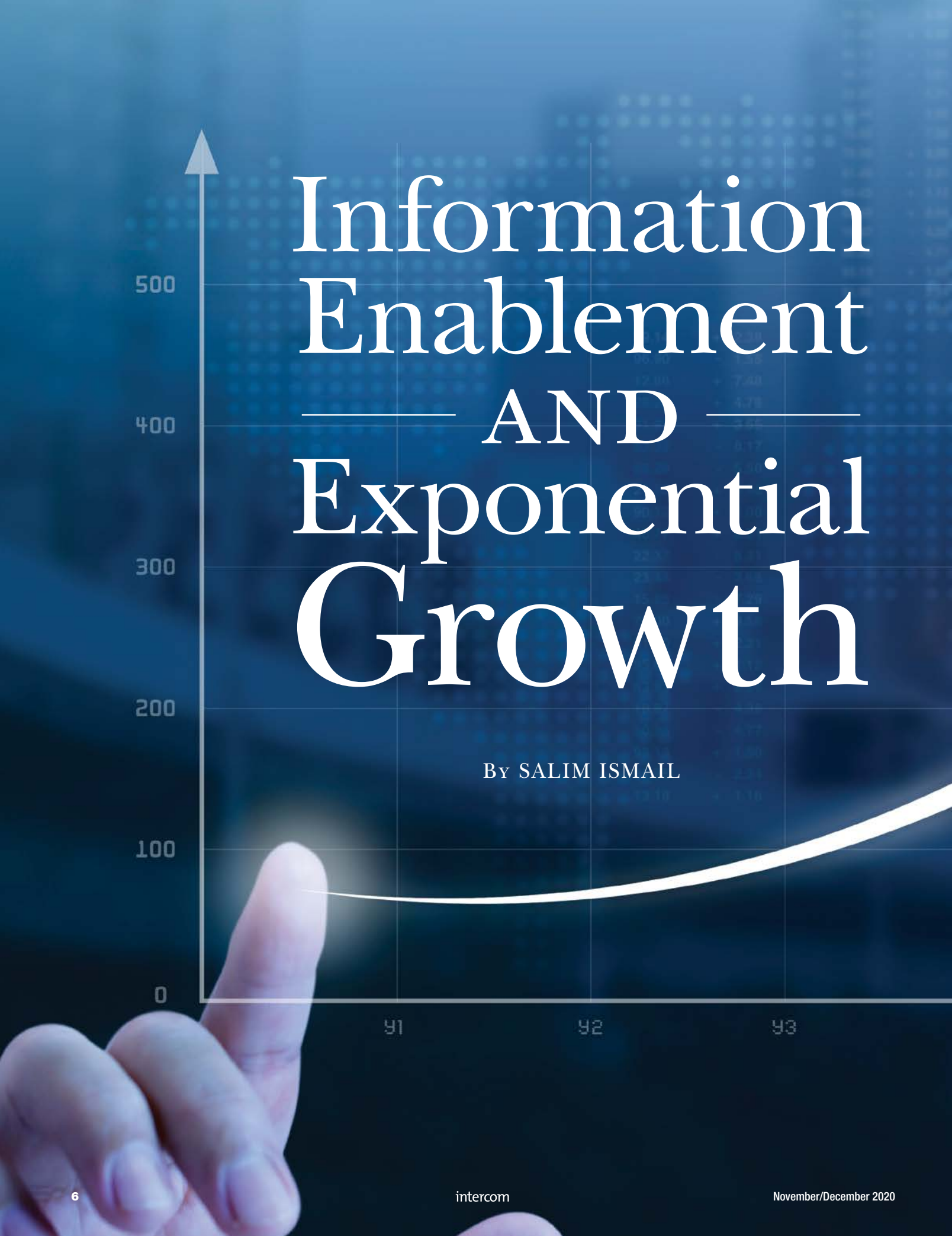

Information Enablement AND Exponential Growth

By SALIM ISMAIL

Y4
Y5
Y6
Y7

TODAY WE SEE an explosion of a new organizational configuration called *Exponential Organizations* (or *ExOs*). This new form of organization is intensely focused on producing a disproportionately large impact—at least 10 times larger than its peers—through innovative and disruptive techniques that leverage accelerating technologies.

It's not about doing what we already do better, faster, or cheaper. Instead, it is about leveraging information and technology to provide the ability to build fundamentally different businesses.

While traditional business models work just fine in a scarcity-based environment, they fail to enable success in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The unprecedented pace and scale of transformation we're experiencing today are unlike anything humankind has ever seen. Scores of technological advances are happening simultaneously while also building on one other.

In "The Six Ds of Exponentials," Peter Diamandis, who cofounded Singularity University, says that anything that becomes digitized enters the same exponential growth we see in computing. Digital information is easy to access, share, and distribute. It can spread at the speed of the internet. Once something can be represented in ones and zeros—from music to biotechnology—it becomes an information-based technology that is capable of exponential growth.

Common ExO Capabilities

Researchers have identified the capabilities that are common among companies that grow at an exponential clip:

- ExOs benefit from five capabilities that map to the acronym SCALE (staff-on-demand, community and crowd, algorithms, leveraged assets, and engagement).
- ExOs benefit from five internal capabilities that map to the acronym IDEAS (interfaces, dashboards, experimentation, autonomy, and social).
- Every ExO declares a massive transformative purpose (MTP): a vast and audacious statement of purpose that captures why the organization exists.

The MTP is more than a mission statement. It doesn't focus on what's possible today; it's aspirational, designed to help us realize a *different* future. The MTP fuels enthusiasm and engages people's hearts and minds to work together to accomplish the goal. For example, Google's MTP is to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

ExOs are more capable than their competitors because they take advantage of accelerating technologies like artificial intelligence, 3D printing, automation, sensors, blockchain, and the Internet of Things. (We have about a dozen technologies all growing exponentially and simultaneously today.) Good examples of ExOs include TED (leveraging community), YouTube (peer-to-peer online video), Airbnb (leveraging others' assets), and Tesla (a computer with wheels).

A big difference between these new organizational configurations and traditional business is that ExOs are *information-enabled*. Organizations that have full command of their information *and* are capable of leveraging computation power can scale infinitely.

Three Forms of Information Enablement

Information enablement has three forms.

1. Turning Traditional Functions from Analog to Digital

Tesla found that after a test drive, Americans weren't buying the car because it wouldn't crawl forward when drivers lifted their foot off the brake, as would happen in vehicles with a standard automatic transmission. So they programmed the car to do that, and the next day, 10,000 Teslas crawled forward from a standing start. Here, a traditional, mechanical function is now information-enabled to be 100% software and information driven.

2. Leveraging and Harnessing Information Streams

Rolls Royce used to sell jet airplane engines, then they decided to lease them. They then rented them by the hour. Today, the company gathers the jet engine sensors' data and sells routing and altitude recommendations back to the airlines. This remarkable transformation turned a manufacturer of physical products made of atoms into a purveyor of new products made of digital bits and bytes.

3. Harnessing Information at Scale

Tesla's in-car user manual adapts and personalizes its content for drivers based on the vehicle's features and extras. They created capabilities that allow them to put the information and data they produce to work for them, as needed and at scale.

Where Can You Learn More about Exponential Growth?

A thriving 7,500-person community of ExO advisors and consultants is available at www.OpenExO.com to guide traditional companies to exponential growth. Most

remarkable is a process framework called an ExO Sprint that leapfrogs leadership, culture, and management thinking three years ahead in just 10 weeks and breaks the organizational immune system that fights new ideas. Hundreds of companies have successfully implemented that framework, including Procter & Gamble, TD Ameritrade, HP, Visa, and Vodacom.

Many business, government, and educational organizations adopt the exponential growth model to help them fend off innovative would-be competitors. Established market leaders work to protect themselves from disruptive competitors by building capabilities that are difficult to replicate and rely on accelerating technologies.

In the past, optimizing for efficiency, predictability, and linear growth was the focus of many organizations. In a volatile future, all organizations will need to become purpose-driven, adaptable, scalable, and agile.

Technical writers have the opportunity to guide their organizations in this direction and lead the charge for information-enabled organizations.

As a professional technical communicator, you are in an excellent position to help the organizations you serve to develop capabilities around information (findability, interoperability, scalability, deliverability, translatability). Remember, when asking your leaders for financial investments and other resources, make sure to focus on selling the value of the innovative, scalable information-development capabilities you are proposing. The value of a capability is the measurable results it can provide the organization.

The expertise of technical writers is essential to the development of information-enabled organizations that aim to leverage ExO-style capabilities for growth. Operationalizing content production and developing content management capabilities that are scalable, automatable, and difficult to duplicate are crucial components of any exponential growth plan.

SALIM ISMAIL *(salim@openexo.com) is a Canadian serial entrepreneur, angel investor, author, speaker, and technology strategist. He has been building disruptive digital companies since the early 2000s. The Co-Founder & Chairman of ExO Works, Ismail is an award-winning strategist and entrepreneur who has gained global recognition for his work addressing exponential technologies and disruptive innovation. Previously he was the founding executive director of Singularity University, VP at Yahoo tasked with building their Brickhouse internal incubator, and founder of multiple startups including Angstro (acquired by Google in 2010). A prolific speaker, Salim gives more than 150 talks a year to audiences of all sizes around the world, including a keynote at the G20 Summit. He has been profiled in the* New York Times, Bloomberg BusinessWeek, Fortune, Forbes, WIRED, Vogue, *and on the BBC. He is the principal author of best-selling, international, business books* Exponential Organizations *and* Exponential Transformation.

In a volatile future, all organizations will need to become purpose-driven, adaptable, scalable, and agile.

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ContentOps as Information Enablement for Exponential Growth

By RAHEL ANNE BAILIE

TO SURVIVE, ORGANIZATIONS need to grow, and that growth often needs to be exponential to establish their dominance in the marketplace. Organizations often grow through digital transformation projects, but they won't succeed if their transformation happens in a silo called "digital." During a project on which I worked for a municipality, the director used to say, "This is not a facelift; it's an organ transplant." Her underlying message was that digital transformation is not a trivial effort or cosmetic change. It's a metamorphosis in the same way that a caterpillar metamorphoses into a butterfly.

Organizations that transform themselves for today's marketplace find a strong need for information enablement. As organizations grow, their ability to create and deliver content quickly, accurately, and to a range of audiences becomes a critical aspect of their competitive advantage.

Accounting: An Example of Transformation

Today's accounting sector is an excellent example of transformation. Manual processes that were once cumbersome and time-consuming are now part of a highly efficient, automated operational system.

Today's accounting discipline is information-enabled and capable of accomplishing a tremendous amount of work in very little time, without adding additional effort or staff. No longer encumbered by inefficient, slow, error-prone, and duplicative manual tasks and other obstacles that prevent it from being efficient, the industry now

relies on a systematic approach to automating accounting tasks and orchestrating related processes.

The result? They're much more capable of aligning with organizational priorities than in the past.

Compare the past with today's world of accounting. Comptrollers, bookkeepers, and accountants access insights and actionable data (at-a-glance and in real-time) through custom-built dashboards that provide near-real-time access to purpose-built views of financial data. The platforms they use to perform their roles allow them to quickly share data and other financial information with the systems that require it and the individuals who need it.

After configuring the appropriate software to present the data in useful ways for financial executives, a relatively small group of people with specialist skills work in the accounting system. Dramatically reduced production times allow them to quickly get insights into the company's financial picture.

All of these changes happened slowly, and I doubt that anyone in the industry at that time would have used the term "digital transformation" to describe the changes they made. They likely wouldn't have claimed a goal of "organizational transformation" either, but perhaps they would have looked at operational improvement. The cumulative saving of resources, time, and effort makes it possible for an organization to scale up financial operations. This example of operational efficiency is just one of many similar organizational transformations.

Information Enabling Exponential Growth

One of the realities of today's business environment is that the fuel for business is information. Content is a critical aspect of the information value chain. The primary way that growing organizations communicate with their customers is through content, whether through the web, software applications, social media, or traditional print deliverables. More often than not, the delivery of content occurs through multiple channels. The content supply chain is complex, and the pipeline craves constant feeding.

To keep pace with the exponential growth required of many businesses today, production and delivery of content require a high degree of automation. Whether it is a newer company like Airbnb or an established company like IBM, the amount of content produced is substantial. Exponential growth is impossible without building advanced content capabilities and adopting appropriate ways of enabling information.

Taking On Content Operations

Perhaps you have heard of DevOps, DesignOps, ResearchOps, AIOps, or other terms appended to Ops (short for operations). Content operations (ContentOps) as information enablement for exponential growth is second nature to technical communicators. The commonality of all of the Ops models is the focus on improvements and efficiencies:

- **Reduce production inefficiencies.** Working smarter instead of harder has been a necessity for technical communicators for decades.
- **Develop repeatable processes.** Technical communication has been years ahead of its marketing and business communication counterparts, mainly because the rules around producing product specifications has reinforced that rigor in our practices.
- **Automate whenever possible.** Single sourcing is a mainstay of technical writing techniques to keep up with our agile counterparts producing code.
- **Scale up outputs.** Technical communicators have been scaling content production for years, using more and more sophisticated tools and techniques.
- **Monitor results.** Before the web, and before the prevalence of the field of usability, technical communicators were "field testing" content and monitoring the results. Reducing (or deflecting) support telephone calls is a long-standing metric in our field.

Test the efficiency quotient of moving to help-authoring tools in the early 2000s or to a component content management system in the following decade. In each case, technical communicators were, in effect, doing ContentOps long before the term became common knowledge.

> A dearth of understanding surrounds the complexities of producing content—especially at scale.

Having an Operational View of Content

When leaders desire organizational growth, they think of the products they sell but seldom consider the content required to produce, market, sell, and service the product and its customers. It's essential to recognize that as profoundly as some organizations understand the agile production of code, their knowledge of agile content production is limited.

A dearth of understanding surrounds the complexities of producing content—especially at scale. Appreciation of the content-related processes required to transform an organization is also lacking.

This lack of knowledge leaves a critical gap between business needs and implementation. Management reverts to what they *know* to try to fill the void. They try to solve all of the complexities at the delivery end by throwing more developers and more code at the problem. This approach often ends badly. The coronavirus crisis illustrates this problem as organizations struggled to

disseminate information related to COVID-19 quickly. Most did so using brute force, asking their development teams to work day and night for weeks on end.

What technical communicators can bring to the table is an understanding, using business vocabulary, of the benefits of ContentOps. Describing the tactical improvements is good, but being able to collaborate with management to accomplish the following is *essential:*

- **Improve collaboration across value streams.** Be ready to position content as a parallel value stream worthy of attention.
- **Automate continuous delivery pipelines.** The idea that content has to be on timed releases can be replaced by an automated delivery mechanism that pushes content out on an as-needed basis. The hotfix is now business as usual.
- **Encourage and improve innovation**. Connecting content to innovation is an inventive idea to many organizations that reduce content to "writing and editing." Show how innovations in content creation, management, and delivery can support your organization leadership's growth goals.
- **Reduce risk.** Organizations in regulated industries pay significant attention to risk management. Demonstrate how tight governance and control of content reduces risk.
- **Create insights.** Insights arise from putting numbers beside any of these operational benefits. It can also mean measuring content performance further. Either way, feeding insights back into the content is a critical aspect of continuous improvement.

Technical communicators are in an ideal position to help management understand how to set up an operational model for content—in other words, ContentOps. Product, sales, and marketing content can all benefit from content production efficiencies implemented by technical publication teams. After all, technical documentation is content; the value is in the operational model for its production and delivery. The significant changes associated with transformation enable an entire organization to benefit from its capabilities.

Business Drivers That Need Information Enablement

Exponential growth comes about through the pursuit of a handful of fundamental business drivers. Each of these drivers has a vital information component. Make it your business to understand what your organization needs to realize an efficient production system for content. A reality check for your organization to grow is knowing how to keep operational costs in check, because exponential growth cannot come with exponential expenses:

- **Extend reach.** The most common driver for transformation is growth. Producing information at scale is critical to this business driver. Organizations today need to use content to increase their market share in existing verticals, enter new markets, develop new audiences, and gain more focus by personalizing content. These changes might involve adding support for additional foreign languages, delivering customer-journey-specific content, and automating delivery.
- **Build brand loyalty.** The flip side to growth is retention. It doesn't make economic sense to gain customers on the acquisition side only to lose them on the retention side. Providing a good customer experience, with focused and accurate quality information that inspires trust, is a must.
- **Reduce time to market**. Getting a product or service to market is often time sensitive. Think of the organizations that needed to respond to the coronavirus pandemic—timing is everything. Whether it means a fitting response in times of crisis or a race against the competition to launch a product into a new market, having a robust operational model that helps reduce waste and manage production efficiencies is the key to a quick pivot.
- **Manage risk.** Organizations in regulated industries keep the legal department's concerns and the requirements of regulators front of mind. They are incredibly aware of how they manage both code and editorial content and whether the information they produce complies with industry regulations. Every organization needs to consider whether the information they make available to others meets accessibility rules. Being able to manage that risk systematically removes a tremendous blocker from operational efficiency.

To enable these business drivers, organizations must pay attention to their content to learn how to manage it well, fix the pain points, and create a high-functioning operational model to support growth at scale. A natural synergy exists between the methods used in the production of technical documentation and the needs of organizations that aspire to grow exponentially. Exploit that synergy by bringing operational efficiencies to organizations positioning themselves for exponential growth. It's a way to break out of the technical content silo and apply methodologies from the profession to the broader operational model for content.

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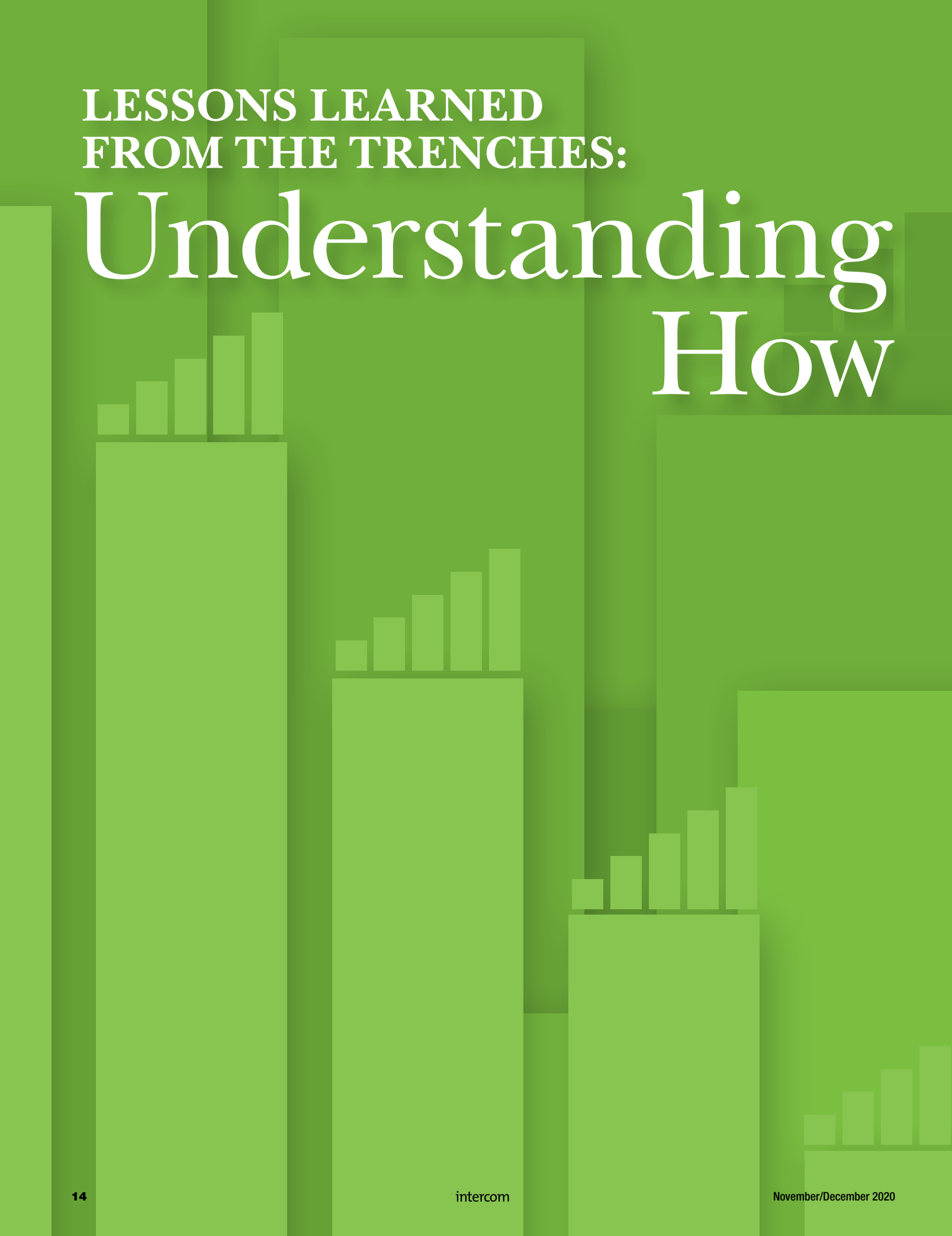
LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TRENCHES:

Understanding How



Organizations Scale

By MEGAN GILHOOLY

FROM 1982 TO 1996, computer maker Compaq grew from zero revenue to $15 billion and from 100 employees to 17,000. This massive growth makes the company one of—if not the—fastest-growing companies in US history.

Today, high-growth companies are so commonplace that they have their own category: scale-ups.

What does it mean to scale? Why do companies need to do it? And why should technical communicators and other information developers need to understand these reasons?

Who better to answer these questions than a former Compaq executive who experienced the hyper-growth firsthand? Karen Walker was employee number 104 at Compaq and ended her 14-year stint there as Vice President of Operating Services. During her time at the company, Karen learned valuable lessons through both successes and failures. She's also spent two decades teaching senior leaders at high-growth companies on how to navigate hyper-growth.

What Does It Mean for a Business to Scale?

A Google search brings up thousands of definitions, but all relate to the ability to grow at a specified speed. Scale also implies the ability to grow revenue without an equal increase in resources.

According to Lighter Capital, "When companies **scale** . . . they add revenue at a faster rate than they take on new costs."

Karen has her own definition: "Scale is the ability to grow without being slowed down or held back."

Why Do Companies Need to Scale?

Companies need to scale because, as Karen puts it, "there is no steady state." In other words, if your company isn't growing, then it's declining. Your company can't just stay as it is, according to Karen, because "your clients are changing, your market is changing, your employees are changing."

Karen adds that venture capital (VC) and private equity (PE) firms care about scalability. "Investors, VCs, PEs—they invest in leaders who are capable of growing their organizations. No one wants a one-to-one return on their investment."

Even companies that don't focus on scaling up rapidly eventually find what works for them at scale. For example, Basecamp, a web application for project management and team collaboration, found success in long, slow growth and rejected the temptation to attempt rapid growth. The founders built the company on principles such as building half a product, letting your customer outgrow you, and "underdoing" your competitors. And the company grew from 45 customers in 2004 to 540,000 in 2010 and to 3.3 million in 2020.

"Even a company like Basecamp, whose founder, Jason Fried, rejected growth for growth's sake, has been wildly successful by investing in opportunities that keep his products clear and simple—and propelling the growth of his firm," Karen explains.

So, scaling is essential for CEOs and investors, but why is this important to content teams?

If you grow your content team by 50% and increase the volume of content you produce by 20%, you aren't scaling your team effectively, and you're not helping your company scale. If, on the other hand, you grow your team by 5% and content production by 300%, then your CEO will be ecstatic.

Okay, it's not always about volume, but you get the point.

It's even better if there's a 300% growth in the performance outcomes that your content provides. To support your company, you need to scale your content operations (ContentOps) intelligently. Once you understand how companies scale, you can leverage ContentOps to provide value that helps the company achieve its growth goals.

How to Scale Effectively

As Karen sees it, the following are three absolute musts in scaling an organization:

- Awareness
- Action
- Accountability

Awareness

The first step in making any change—and scaling *is* change—is adopting the *need* to change. "It's hard to change behavior," says Karen. "It's impossible if you don't believe that things *can be* different and that they *need* to be—it is in your best self-interest. It would be best if you clarified that the steady state, status quo, is a myth—simply put, you will grow or you will decline. And lastly, awareness that the needs, goals, methods of others are as valuable as your own."

Translated to content professionals, scaling a content team requires change management. Any good change management model (and there are many of them) starts with getting stakeholders to acknowledge the need to change and even creating urgency for why the change needs to happen *now*.

Need a new content tool? Maybe, but if you request a new tool to make your writers' lives more comfortable, you're not pitching the right benefit.

Your first task is to prove that the changes you make in ContentOps will help the company scale. Does the new tool enable your team to do more work without growing the team? Will a new tool reduce the time reviewers spend without negatively impacting the customer experience? Will purchasing a tool help scale the company more effectively than you building your own?

Going back to Karen's advice, prove to your executives that ContentOps *can,* and *should,* be different to meet the organization's objectives and that your suggested change aligns with the needs and goals of other teams throughout your organization.

Action

Proper scaling requires effort, but the speed of action will vary depending on the impact. In a *Forbes* article called "Say No to 'Just Do It,'" Karen discusses the implications of moving too slowly when decisions require speed *and* the impact of moving too quickly on decisions that deserve more forethought: "A bias for action is necessary for high-speed growth. Like many strengths, if that bias is overdone, you'll have a weakness. The preference [for speed] has been so helpful—and so rewarded—in the past, it might be a significant blind spot in your organization."

In the same article, Karen also discusses comfort with ambiguity: "When we're uncomfortable with the unresolved and the ambiguous, sometimes we have an impulse to act, solely to gain a feeling of control over a situation and eliminate a problem. But what if that isn't the best answer, just the most comfortable one?"

I spent three years leading global content teams at Amazon, which touts *bias for action* as a leadership principle. But Amazon pits *bias for action* against other principles like *insist on high standards* and *dive deep*. How does the company expect its employees to do thorough planning and focus on the best quality while moving quickly? It doesn't.

Amazon uses the analogy of one-way and two-way doors for quick decision-making and assessment of action. A two-way door is something that you can walk into, then turn around and come back out, mostly unscathed. In these cases, make a decision, take action, test, then reassess.

You can't retract a one-way door—once it's out, there's no turning back. Anything that affects employees' pay, changes that negatively affect customers, and statements to the press, for example, are one-way doors. These cases require more deliberation before taking action.

Content professionals looking to purchase tools can turn seemingly one-way doors (due to large price tags) into two-way doors to support a bias for action. For example, purchasing a software-as-a-service (SaaS) tool that supports industry standards leaves open the possibility to easily shift to a different tool in the future, decreasing the risk compared to buying on-premises tools, buying tools that don't support industry standards, or building proprietary tools.

Accountability

We all know the importance of accountability, yet many organizations struggle to find mechanisms that promote this vital factor. "Accountability is the Achilles heel of most organizations," says Karen. "Especially those in hyper-growth mode, because growth covers a lot of sins! Use a mutual accountability process to increase your odds of success and turbocharge it by layering in substantial debrief/learn sessions along the way."

Karen emphasizes that accountability needs to be two-way. "If you have only individual accountability, it's much more fragile than if you and your team are all committed and accountable to each other. Individuals are prone to distraction and competing priorities and, even with the best of intentions, will fail to meet their commitments. But there's great power in mutual accountability, and using this structure will move your outcomes from fragile to flourish."

Getting back to that Achilles heel: How can we get past the difficulty of getting people to commit and be accountable? According to Karen, it comes down to processes and trust: "Accountability isn't blaming. It shouldn't elicit defensiveness when the process is solid and there is trust on the team. It will help you stay aligned and on track to meet your commitments."

To build accountability into your processes, Karen says you need to explore answers to the following questions and discuss them in a team setting:

- What happened?
- What's working?
- What's different than we expected?
- Why was our reality different than our expectations?
- How do we need to adjust to achieve our outcomes?
- How should we adapt our outcomes based on this information?

Karen suggests debriefing a lot. Don't wait for something terrible to happen. "High-performance individuals and teams debrief to learn and then apply that learning. It makes us more effective."

Large organizations become proficient at doing root cause analysis on impactful mistakes, which is essential. More important, though, is to debrief regularly after any event: a team retreat, a project, a conflict, or a win. "It doesn't have to be an hours-long ordeal," according to Karen. "Just a quick check-in focused on even a few of the questions above will help."

The approach is no different for content teams. At Amazon, I led a team that produced 60,000 pieces of content every year. When I started, they developed content in a slow, unidirectional process that took an average of 120 days per request. I quickly converted the team to Agile content teams that held daily meetings and performed biweekly retrospectives.

The debriefs covered at each of these led the team to actions that decreased the average turnaround time for requests from 120 to 45 days—a 63% year-over-year (YoY) improvement—within the first year and further reduced it to 12 days (a 73% YoY improvement) per request in the second year—a 90% improvement in just two years.

The improvement relied on negotiating with legal to significantly improve the turnaround time of legal reviews and creating an escalations team to handle escalations that previously were consuming the entire team's time. Frequent debriefs led us to discover the most critical issues tying up the process. In essence, we created new norms that kept every team involved in ContentOps accountable to improve turnaround time.

Bottom Line

I joined the Zoomin team because being part of a high-growth company is exciting. I love what we do, because the product itself helps large enterprises and hyper-growth companies scale content delivery. As a former leader of large content delivery teams, I understand what it takes to scale your content team to support your company's need to scale.

Karen's prescription fits perfectly. Start by making stakeholders aware that your team can and should change for scalability, take actions that create exponential benefits, and add accountability to your processes. By focusing on your team's scalability, you'll make better decisions, add value to your organization, and make your CEO very happy.

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INVESTING IN SCALABILITY:

The Capability That Helps You Remove Friction from Your Content Lifecycle

By SARAH O'KEEFE

COMPANY GROWTH MAGNIFIES the challenges of information enablement. When you grow, you add products, product variants, markets, and languages—and each of those factors adds complexity. Inefficiencies in your content lifecycle multiply for every new language or customer segment you add.

As a result, content *scalability*—increasing content throughput without increasing resources—becomes critical. Consider a simple localization example: When you translate, you have a few manual workarounds that require one hour of work for every 100 pages of translated content. Translating 100 pages of content into eight languages requires eight hours of workarounds. But as your content load grows, you are shipping 1,000 pages of content per month and translating into 20 languages. Suddenly, you are facing 200 hours of manual workarounds per month—*the equivalent of one full-time person per year.*

Scalable content requires that you assess your content lifecycle, identify points of friction, and remove them. Typically, these include the following:

- Content creators rewriting information instead of reusing available content
- Content editors correcting basic mistakes in terminology and usage
- Content production workflows that require manual intervention
- Content delivery mechanisms that require manual intervention (for example, a person zipping a file package and moving it from one place to another)
- Content archiving policies that require human reviews

The greater the volume of content you are working with, the more critical it becomes to remove these roadblocks.

> ... authors need to have existing resources at their fingertips to see what information assets already exist and focus on closing the gaps.

Avoiding Content Duplication

The least scalable part of the content lifecycle is the content author, who creates information in text, graphics, audio, or video. For maximum productivity, authors need to have existing resources at their fingertips to see what information assets already exist and focus on closing the gaps. Authors often unknowingly create information that already exists elsewhere, duplicating effort and wasting limited (and expensive) authoring resources. Worse, this situation frequently results in creating two similar (yet incompatible) pieces of content.

Maximizing Content Reuse

After eliminating content duplication, organizations should focus on developing a content-reuse strategy. Content reuse means, for example, that you write a product description once and then make that description available for reuse across your content universe. Deeper reuse is possible, however, especially in technical content. In technical documentation, we often repurpose standardized language: things like notes, cautions, warnings, or common steps (e.g., "1. Back up the database."). Well-developed reuse strategies allow authors to reuse this type of information instead of recreating it.

Content scalability for authors maximizes the use of available content to reduce the writers' workload.

Terminology

Content needs to use consistent terminology. Product names should be consistent, and a technical term should always mean the same thing, regardless of where you use it. While technical editors are excellent at identifying and fixing these issues, terminology software can help you prevent inconsistencies in word usage. Terminology management systems can scan a document, identify disallowed or deprecated terms, and suggest appropriate corrections. Grammar software and other pattern-recognition software can help ensure that writers are following basic rules—such as a minimum or a maximum number of words for an abstract—or flag headings that are problematic for search engines (such as "Overview" or "Introduction," which are too generic).

Production and Delivery

Content production is the process of moving content from the authoring environment into its finished format. Delivery can be as simple as clicking a Publish button (as in WordPress, for example), or it might require converting content from its source to other formats, like PDF. For most organizations, content production and delivery should be completely automated after the information is approved. Automating content production and delivery improves scalability.

Consider manual intervention only if you can justify the cost and effort for your business. For example, a textbook producer or someone who makes award-winning films would consider manual production an excellent investment to maximize their content quality, but if you are producing high volumes of business content, it is doubtful that the cost of manual production—and the resulting slowdown in your content production processes—is justifiable.

Archiving and Governance

Not all content is evergreen. Some content has a short lifespan. A plan for archiving and deleting out-of-date and incorrect content is critical. For example, in the help

content for a cloud-based software product, you should remove instructions for working around a bug in the code after the developers fix the error.

Content teams commonly overlook archiving and deleting content when developing a content planning process. The following are some factors to consider:

- Does the content have a limited lifespan? Does it have a known expiration date?
- Should the content be removed from visibility automatically when it reaches the end of its lifespan?
- If the website includes documentation for several versions of a product, how will you identify the current version and ensure that it gets search priority? Will you provide website visitors the ability to specify that they want to search for and access earlier versions of your content?
- When content becomes obsolete, does it get deleted or archived? Does it remain on your site, clearly labeled that it is out of date?

As an organization grows, so too does the need for scalable content operations. Failing to develop the capabilities needed to scale content production can result in your organization falling behind, unable to meet the needs of the prospects you hope to convert and the customers you aim to serve. Investing in content scalability can also help you avoid the need to increase content production resources significantly as you grow.

If you are concerned about a rapid rise in content demand, take a hard look at where you can improve content scalability.

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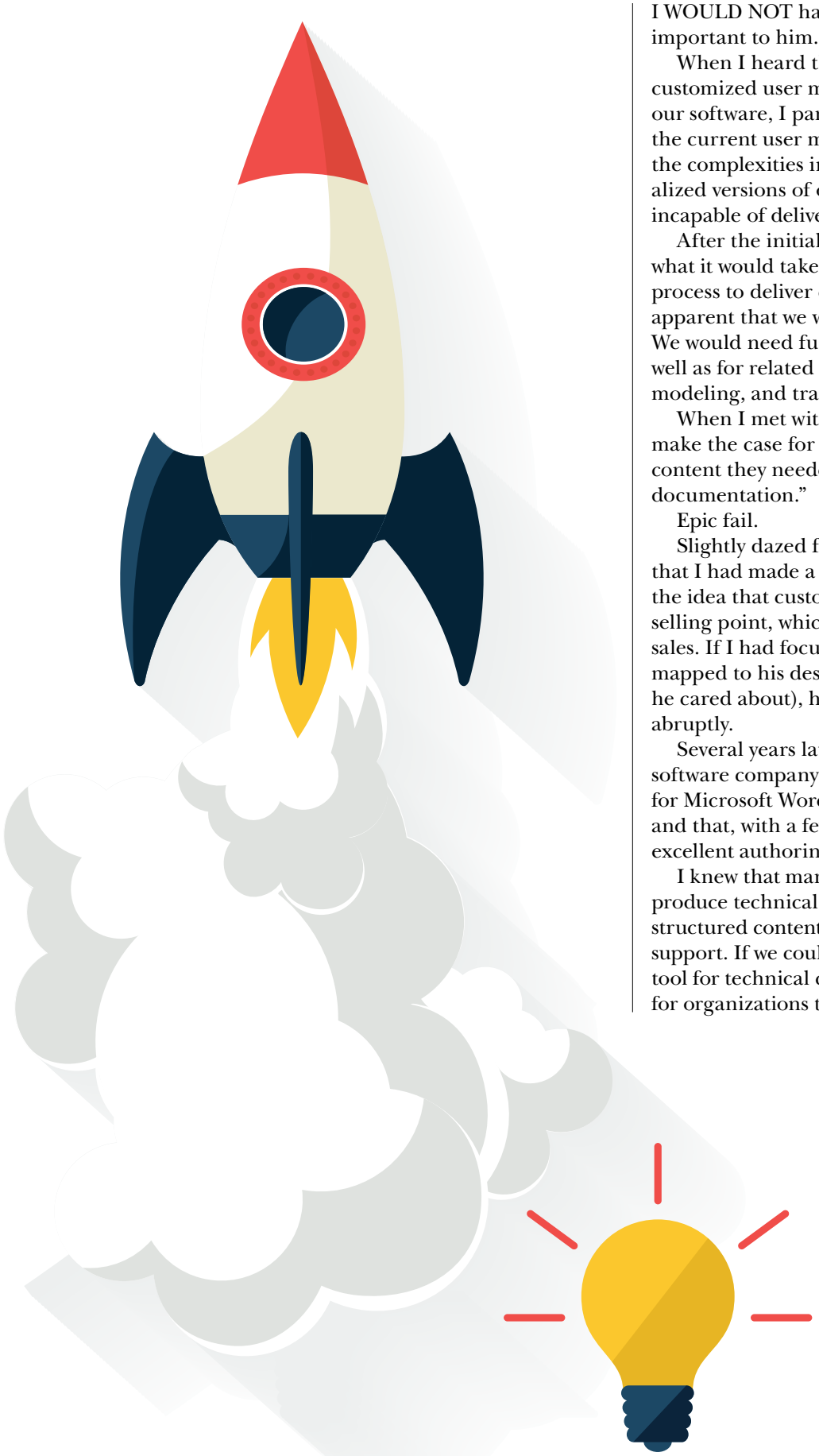
SELLING THE Value of Capability to Leaders

BY MARK LEWIS



I WOULD NOT have failed if I had known what was important to him.

When I heard that the sales staff wanted us to deliver customized user manuals to customers who purchased our software, I panicked. Oh, no! We could barely keep the current user manual up to date, let alone manage the complexities involved in creating multiple, individualized versions of our product documentation. We were incapable of delivering what the business required.

After the initial shock wore off, I focused on learning what it would take to reengineer our content production process to deliver customized content. It quickly became apparent that we would require a new content solution. We would need funding to purchase new software, as well as for related services like configuration, content modeling, and training to tackle this challenge.

When I met with the owner of our company to make the case for providing the sales team with the content they needed, his response was: "No, it's just documentation."

Epic fail.

Slightly dazed from the quick rebuff, it dawned on me that I had made a huge mistake. I should have pitched the idea that custom user manuals would be a great selling point, which would address his goal of increasing sales. If I had focused on selling him a capability that mapped to his desire to bring in more revenue (a result he cared about), he might not have dismissed my request abruptly.

Several years later, I started working for a new software company that sold an XML authoring plug-in for Microsoft Word. I thought the product was impressive and that, with a few adjustments, it might make an excellent authoring platform for technical writers.

I knew that many technical writers were looking to produce technical documentation content in XML, a structured content standard that Microsoft Word did not support. If we could create a version of our authoring tool for technical communication professionals who work for organizations that use Microsoft Word, we could sell

our plug-in to those technical writing shops. Creating an optimized version of our plug-in for technical writers would allow us to enable documentation teams to enjoy the benefits of XML authoring without the discomfort and expense of having to move their writers to an entirely new authoring platform. If we got it right, we could open up a new vertical market for our software—and that could translate to an increase in revenue from sales.

While I was relatively new to my role at the company, I knew our CEO loved ideas that increased sales. With this knowledge in mind, I approached him and made my pitch. This time around, I sold the value of the capabilities I wanted him to fund and explained how those changes would lead to revenue generation. I asked for funding—and I got it! We built the product and successfully created a new revenue stream for our firm.

Fear of the unknown is powerful. You can also use fear to sell. Executives have seen digital transformation's ability to disrupt entire industries, displacing market leaders (think Blockbuster, Eastman Kodak). No executives today want to find themselves on the list of companies whose leaders failed to adapt to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

No executives today want to find themselves on the list of companies whose leaders failed to adapt to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

To gain funding for a content production initiative, find out if the executives who hold the purse strings are afraid of disruption. If so, your job is much easier. If you're hoping to move to intelligent content, for example, focusing on capabilities you'll gain—like *adaptability* (the ability to quickly respond and adjust to changes in the marketplace)—might be an excellent place to start. Intelligent content, by definition, is *adaptable*.

Don't waste time trying to sell the solution. Sell the capability to adapt. Sell the ability to adjust as an enterprise capability, a scalable capacity that spans departments. For example, sales and marketing might determine that the customer-journey content needs significant change or personalization. No problem. You can adapt your content to future needs and formats not yet known.

Learn the goals of the executives. Sell them on capabilities that address those goals.

If the capability that you need is too much to build in a single effort, you might have to make it in stages. The best way to communicate the progression of change that you need to make is to use a maturity model. I've used maturity models often to sell the value of an intelligent content solution, but I was typically selling to a documentation manager.

Regardless, the components of the pitch are the same. For each stage, specify the following:

- The investment
- The result
- The return/benefit (new capability)
- The business goal addressed by the realization of the new capability

This information will inform your *capability maturity model*. The model shows the return on investment at each stage of the initiative, so executives understand where the value is coming from and how you plan to develop it. A new capability must map to one or more business goals. Your capability maturity model should address the concerns and objectives of your executive leadership.

As writers, one of the first things we do before we begin writing is to make sure that we understand our audience. We need to understand their goals, desires, fears, and language. (I discuss learning how to be an "executive whisperer" in "Authors Must Be Multilingual or Fail.")

Know your audience. Know their goals. Show how a capability—or set of capabilities—maps to business goals. Sell the value. Win.

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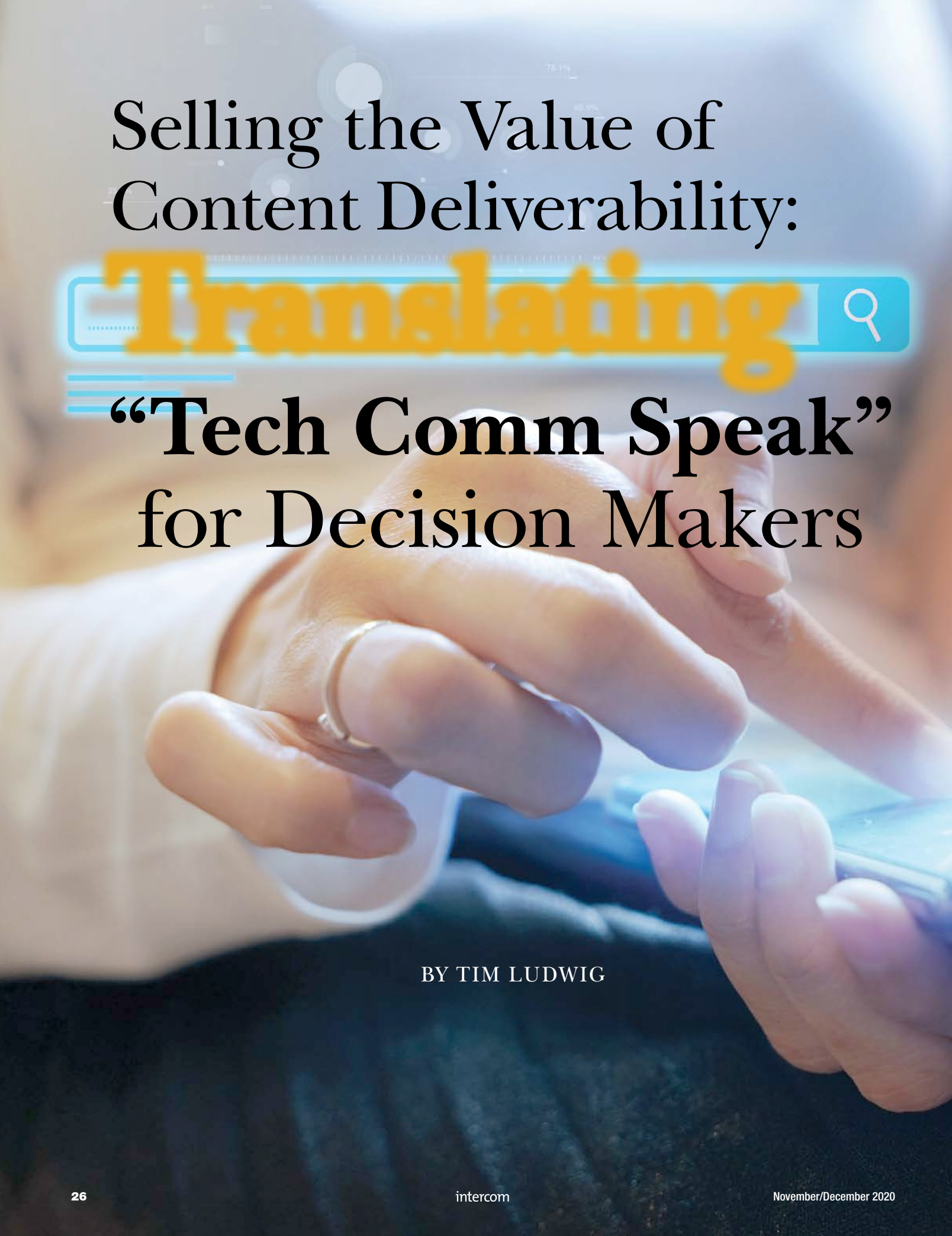
Selling the Value of Content Deliverability:



"Tech Comm Speak" for Decision Makers

BY TIM LUDWIG

SUCCESSFULLY SELLING DELIVERABILITY means speaking the language of whomever you're selling to.

Within the technical communication bubble, tech comm speak is a natural, professional language. Once outside of your department, tech comm speak causes translation issues. Consider the times you've lamented that your department is overlooked when pitching new ideas or implementing changes—tech comm speak is likely at the root of it, again. A term that most technical writers use and understand might mean something drastically different to those you are communicating with.

Take *deliverability*, for example. In the technical communication field, deliverability is a capability that allows an organization to distribute content across multiple channels—a requirement in today's business world. In marketing, deliverability is the ability to push

messages into the individual email inboxes of those the company is targeting with its promotional campaigns.

Technical communication teams have various levels of deliverability maturity. Some organizations build basic content deliverability capabilities (think single-source, multichannel publishing). More mature teams attempt to extend deliverability across *all* distribution channels—an omnichannel content delivery approach. Deliverability can change per audience.

The catch is that those responsible for approving changes in your organization often are not part of the technical communication literati. It's your job to translate tech comm speak into something meaningful for stakeholders who don't speak your language.

Start by answering the question they're all thinking: "What's in it for me?"

It would be best if you answered that question with real, honest-to-goodness, tangible functionalities *with capabilities*. What outcome can your suggestion result in that will provide stakeholders with a clear path to a win that they understand?

The Function of Deliverability

Before you march into a meeting with your organization's upper management, you should prep your script.

Don't improvise. Prepare a clear message. You might know what deliverability means to you and your team, but you have to shape those words into something that someone who is not a technical communicator can grasp.

Start with the function of deliverability. What is deliverability capable of providing to the organization?

It's easy to blur the lines between delivery, deliverables, and deliverability, so start by separating them into simple categories as they relate to information development:

- *Delivery* is the process of publishing content to various channels and serving it to those who need it; it's the *where* of your content.
- *Deliverables* are the content itself (e.g., physical copies, electronic); they are the *what* of your content.
- *Deliverability* is the processes of content creation that streamline both delivery and deliverables; it is the *how* of your content.

Consider using this level of specificity. Otherwise, your audience may misunderstand what you are attempting to communicate. Do an excellent job of explaining the differences, and you will avoid confusing your audience.

Once you've defined deliverability as the how of your content, it's time to put on your sales hat.

Convincing Stakeholders to Care

It's your time to shine, but on your audience's terms and in their words.

The language you use to convince them to care must be compelling. Consider the following:

- If you want them to spend money, you have to highlight the value.
- Don't make assumptions about their preexisting knowledge—that could become your downfall.
- Use concrete examples of value instead of conceptual benefits.

Once you've explained deliverability in plain language, it's time to put together some use cases that will give your argument some weight. Deliver your points using the key performance indicators that the business values most, and connect them to the capability you're seeking to develop.

Deliverability is only one capability required to create an information-enabled organization.

Remember, you're not orating in the ancient Roman Forum. You're delivering a concise pitch that needs to pack a punch. Ditch the Aristotelian diatribe you had planned for this capability, and drill down on one of the most significant value points.

You have options. Tell them about the top functional powers that this new paradigm of delivery can enable—things like automated formatting, API-ready content, rapid content updates, or maybe something they didn't even realize was possible, like personalized content experiences at scale.

Optimizing deliverability ultimately affects both your customers and your internal personnel. Personalization of content is a value proposition and aspect of deliverability that directly influences the experiences you provide to customers, employees, partners, and other stakeholders.

Let's review a couple of business cases based on real-world situations that you might use to put a little more weight behind your argument and make a convincing case to stakeholders.

Deliverability Enhances SaaS Documentation

Scenario

You're a project management software-as-a-service (SaaS) company with frequent version releases. You have a small team that needs to stay on top of documentation updates and make sure that new documentation is always available and outdated documentation isn't.

Personalization and Deliverability Capabilities

- Use multichannel publishing, making sure content in all of your deliverables is updated consistently, immediately.
- Filter content by audience segment and characteristics to ensure the right people are getting the right content.
- Use variable content to update standard components that you repurpose across information products (deliverables) in seconds.

Benefits for Your Organization and How to Sell Them

The sales team can generate information faster for individual prospects. They can use content filters to match buyer personas and have the ammunition they need to tap each audience they're hoping to influence.

Product teams don't need to wait for documentation to be complete to release the product.

Documentation teams can take the lead, giving extra prerelease prep time to marketing and sales.

Deliverability Enhances Hardware Documentation

Scenario

You're a medical device manufacturer with a product that doesn't see many updates. While the product remains relatively stable and doesn't change much over time, it's a complex product with customer support as a significant cost center. The support staff and the documentation team exist in silos; the technical communication team focuses on compliance, while support concentrates on customer service.

Personalization and Deliverability Capabilities

- Provide your organization with a single source of truth from which to deliver content.
- Improve content review cycles, and provide defensible audit trails that address compliance regulations.
- Automate content publishing everywhere, and break down silos between departments (like documentation and customer support), which is incredibly time-saving for large user guides full of regulatory jargon.

Benefits for Your Organization and How to Sell Them

Audits are a pain, but they happen in our industry, and they're necessary (you can lean into this pain point, noting how annoying audits are to management). According to a 2021 industry benchmark from Greenlight Guru, three out of four medical device professionals reported that they weren't confident that they would pass an unannounced audit by the US Food and Drug Administration or (in the European Union) Notified Bodies.

E-signatures and review cycles all but eliminate audit anxiety and enable moving away from an overfocus on risk reduction in your documentation to using your content to empower sales, increase customer satisfaction, and improve the customer self-support and self-service experience.

Optimizing your content delivery system allows you to deliver content to multiple channels (websites, user manuals, online and in-product help, knowledge centers, chatbots, voice assistants) at the same time. Prospects, customers, internal support teams, and compliance auditors will all benefit.

Your sales team will view your newfound content deliverability prowess as a competitive differentiator: "Our documentation is better than theirs, and we have happy customers to back it up."

These are just a few examples of how you might translate technical communication capabilities into business uses. To ensure leadership understands why they should approve a change in how you create, manage, and deliver content, focus on selling the value of the capabilities those changes provide and how they will transform the organization.

While product features and their benefits are essential to understand, leaders are intensely focused on results.

Now It's Time to Deliver

A quote from STC Fellow and content strategy maven Ann Rockley applies perfectly to this problem: "You're always going to sell a business case to management on the capabilities they can gain."

Leaders invest in capabilities that deliver measurable results. While product features and their benefits are essential to understand, leaders are intensely focused on results.

Take yourself outside the technical communication echo chamber, and make the change valuable for the stakeholders you're hoping to sway. Reconfigure deliverability to express its value outside of your department, then lean in to functionality that leads to those value points. Make the potential benefits of adding a new capability straightforward and easy to understand.

Sure, it's easier said than done. When the time comes to purvey what deliverability can do in language that will sway stakeholders, this is an excellent place to start.

TIM LUDWIG *(tim.ludwig@jorsek.com) attempts—with middling success—to use language to break complex things into simpler things. He's found that the technical communication world is the perfect place to do this. Tying language and our rapidly evolving technological landscape together, he relishes the daily challenges and learning. He practices this as a copywriter for Jorsek Inc., makers of easyDITA.*

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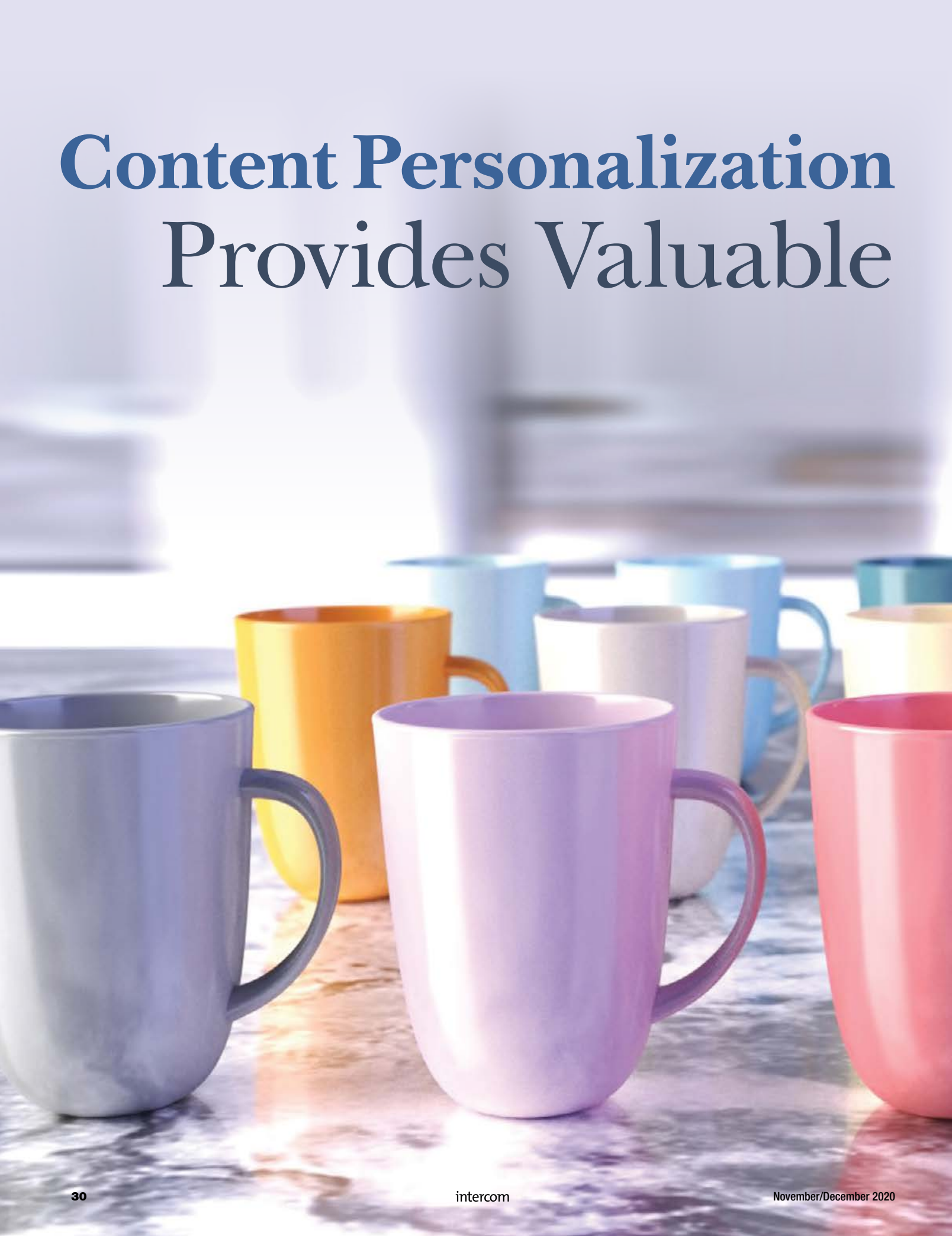
Content Personalization Provides Valuable



Capabilities across the Enterprise

BY KEVIN NICHOLS

PERSONALIZATION CAN PROVE its wealth in a multitude of ways, but only when correctly executed.

Personalization is the practice of targeting content to users based on one or more of the following factors:

- Who the users are
- Where they are
- When, why, and how they access content
- What device they use to access the content

Thousands of success stories recount how personalization helps organizations generate revenue or improve lead generation, but many horror stories describe overly expensive initiatives that yield substandard results. Many of the negative experiences result when an organization fails to understand how it should harness personalization for its benefit. Often, organizations do not recognize how personalization learnings can improve customer content experiences or model a more effective content operation.

Technical documentation teams can help develop the capabilities to help their organization personalize content at scale, but they first need to understand the value that personalization can have for them and other teams. In this article, we explore three use cases where personalization can benefit a business:

- Informing the business-to-business (B2B) sales team members so they can better nurture and engage with a lead
- Personalizing customer-journey content to improve the experience in each stage of the journey and with all of the business groups with which the customer interacts, improving the content experience overall
- Leveraging a componentized content model from technical documentation to deliver personalization and set the stage for personalization success

Segmenting B2B Prospects to Qualify Sales Leads

Beneficiaries: sales, marketing, and customer experience teams

Segmenting prospective B2B customers helps us to understand a visitor's industry segment and subsegment and allows us to qualify the visitor as a sales lead with whom the sales team can better engage.

For any initiative to be successful, it must prove its wealth. For a B2B organization, the value of personalization includes helping a sales team to better understand what interests a prospective customer and ultimately achieve more effective communication with them. Personalized content may be technical or marketing in nature. The key is to know your prospect well enough to provide what they need, when they need it.

Many companies focus on personalizing content to a known or recognized user (i.e., someone your organization understands). You can also benefit from personalizing to the unknown user, and that approach can enable further success once you know who that visitor is.

One global company that engaged my services had never personalized content. This B2B company serves different industries—automotive, health, financial services—and offers several types of services and products across a broad spectrum of capabilities.

Our personalization initiative centered around three core objectives:

- Segment visitors into specific industry categories to understand which sector is the most appealing to individual visitors (e.g., automotive versus financial services). Add website visitors to the segment that will best meet their information needs based on specific keywords they use to search for content, promotional banners they click on, or sections of the website they visit.
- Move visitors to the appropriate subsegment by first determining which subindustry they are most interested in—hedge funds, insurance, or investment banking. Determining which subsegment is most interesting to a website visitor involves providing options for each subindustry of content and noting on which subindustry page they land.
- Push specific content about that subindustry (Financial Services > Investment Banking) to website visitors in exchange for their contact information. Offer them content particular to that subindustry, but grant them access to it only after they give their contact information.

The key is to know your prospect well enough to provide what they need, when they need it.

This cookie-based approach to clickstream personalization allows the company to capture information about the prospective customer during the sales qualification process. By providing the visitor with increasingly relevant information as they click their way through your content (during a single or multiple visits to your website), you can qualify the lead more quickly. Most importantly, this approach allows you to gather valuable information on their interests and behaviors before they ever provide their contact information.

This effort demonstrates that technical documentation content can prove critical in the decision-making process that drives prospects to advance from one stage of the customer journey to the next. Personalization of content experiences can yield significant increases in overall engagement. Segmenting (and subsegmenting) your audience and personalizing the content you deliver to them results in more page views per visitor, increases

in repeat visits, and longer times spent on the website overall. Building the capability to personalize content benefits the sales team significantly, ensuring higher quality leads.

This effort also demonstrates that technical documentation content is critical to the sales process. Sales teams can use the data gathered to sell to individual prospects more effectively. The ability to personalize technical documentation at scale can enhance sales-enablement efforts, providing your sales teams with the product content they need to close more deals.

Personalizing Content for the Customer Journey to Understand Content Consumption Patterns per Stage

Beneficiaries: customer experience, sales, marketing, customer satisfaction, technical documentation, user experience, and web design teams

In addition to generating revenue, personalization can offer valuable benefits to additional parts of your organization. For an interactive product page containing technical documentation content, personalization efforts can help you discover which areas of the customer journey require which types of content. Furnishing both technical writers and designers of interactive apps with helpful information about prospects and their information consumption patterns allows you to figure out which content you should invest in and who it will benefit.

You might choose to tag specific content as appropriate for particular phases of the customer journey. Tagging content this way allows you to determine where customers are in their journey and track them as they move from one phase to the next.

You'll need to create content appropriate for each stage of the journey, using A-B testing (when you're uncertain) to determine which content performs best.

For example, you might need to create content that supports a prospect during the *initial awareness phase* (content that conveys who you are, what sets you apart from the competition, and what problems you solve) and the subsequent *research phase* (content that supports prospects actively seeking information about your offerings). After that, create content to convince prospects to provide their contact information, and, eventually, convert them into a customer. You'll need post-conversion and post-sales content to maintain customer satisfaction, build customer loyalty, and convince existing customers to make additional purchases of related products and services.

To get it right, you'll want to invest in determining which content visitors engage with during each phase of their interactions with you, and you'll need to know how they did so. Tracking interactions with technical documentation at each stage of the customer journey allows you to understand which content moves your visitors from one phase to the next, improving the value of your content overall and at each stage of the customer journey.

When implemented thoughtfully, content personalization can provide myriad benefits to a variety of internal business teams. One area of the company that may benefit more than others are teams that provide

post-sales support. Personalization allows you to effectively target technical content to existing customers' unique needs (reducing attrition and increasing customer loyalty) throughout their relationship with your brand.

Recognizing that both prospects and customers alike might interact with your content across numerous channels is vital. They'll encounter your content with certain expectations at each phase of their journey, expectations that you need to be capable of meeting. To improve understanding of the end-to-end customer journey across your organization, share what you've learned about the cross-channel customer journey with other departments. Doing so will empower other departments to improve business decisions because they'll better understand how interactions between prospects and technical content impact their efforts specifically.

Measuring personalization performance at scale is easier when you can access a cross-channel reporting dashboard—an at-a-glance view of key performance indicators relevant to your business goals and tuned to your business processes. A unified content planning team and content production processes are essential to scaling personalization efforts.

Leveraging a Component Content Management System for Personalization

Beneficiaries: technical documentation, social media, marketing, content marketing teams

Organizations that successfully leverage content personalization view it as a critical business capability and a central function of their business. They structure teams and operational models around it and build it into their channel capabilities. Technical documentation teams often possess an operating model that allows them to deploy personalization solutions successfully. In most cases, personalization relies on serving up existing content to a website visitor based on who that visitor is or what they need.

When you know a visitor is interested in Internet of Things solutions, you serve them that type of content. But to do so at scale, you must be capable of promoting personalized content in various ways: within a banner in an ad, in a hero space on a website, in an email message, or as a recommended product list displayed on all product pages. Leveraging structured content, you can repurpose prose from a whitepaper in an email promotion, on a website hero space, within banner advertisements, and within social properties. Technical documentation teams are often capable of creating componentized, reusable, and structured content because they work in a world that focuses on content that can be repurposed and delivered to multiple distribution channels.

Let's assume you publish a technical journal and want to redesign the publication's website and offer a personalized content experience. Part of the redesign will include creating templates to capture promotional copy around each article. For example, you might create a short message to feature in the hero space on the website home page, social copy for each of the social properties you support, advertising copy for an email promotion, and marketing copy for use on promotional areas of your website.

By structuring this content with reuse in mind and leveraging a component content management system's power, you'll be capable of personalizing the copy and images, serving up specific content optimized for individuals interested in each type of technical article, and delivering in formats appropriate for the channel. You don't have to stop there. You can further increase the value of personalization by extending it to things like infographics, charts, and introductory paragraphs.

Building the capability to personalize content at scale ensures the right content reaches the right people at the right time. Extending the utility of a successful, scalable personalization effort allows you to sell the value to other teams in your organization. Getting it right in the technical documentation team first will enable you to tell the story of the impact of structured content to others.

This article illustrates several ways in which being capable of providing personalized content experiences can benefit your organization. Maturing this capability can provide benefits to nearly any content producing department, from human resources (for example, personalized benefits information packages) to training to legal.

Technical documentation teams are in a great position to guide their organizations in developing content personalization capabilities. Such capabilities can bring extraordinary value to other groups within the organization, further increasing the technical documentation discipline's value. Personalizing content can improve customer experiences and create competitive differentiation while helping an organization meet its business objectives and streamline its content operations.

KEVIN NICHOLS *is an award-winning thought leader, digital industry expert, and author. Today he is cofounder and Executive Director, Experience, at AvenueCX. He was a key contributor to creating MIT OpenCourseWare, grew one of the largest content strategy teams in the world at SapientNitro, and has worked on content for dozens of global brands. At AvenueCX, Kevin takes his passion about content and works with global brands to improve their overall content and customer experiences. He is author of Enterprise Content Strategy: A Project Guide and coauthor of UX for Dummies. Kevin is also the chair of the Content Strategy Alliance Best Practices initiative and a member of the Consortium of Personalization Professionals.*

QUICK LESSON:

The Key to Delivering Personalized Content Experiences at Scale

BY VAL SWISHER AND REGINA LYNN PRECIADO

WE'RE GOING TO let you in on a little secret. The key to delivering personalized content experiences at scale is standardization.

That's right. Standardization enables personalization. We call this truth the "Personalization Paradox."

The Personalization Paradox

Often, when we first think of personalization, we think of unique content created and delivered for a unique individual, but creating content this way does not scale.

The only way to deliver personalization at scale is to automate content delivery. For that to work, you've got to change how you "do" content.

With standards, your systems can find the right content at the right time. With standards, your content can be mixed and matched seamlessly, in whatever order your customer encounters it.

Your customer might not even realize that they've received a personalized experience, but they'll know they got what they needed, when and how they needed it.

Conversely, the lack of documented and enforced standards can show up in your content and negatively affect the customer experience in many ways:

- Increased confusion
- Mismatched assets
- Decreased quality
- Degraded brand
- Increased translation costs
- Increased time-to-market

Without standards, any attempt to deliver a personalized experience is doomed to fail.

What Is Content Standardization?

Content standardization is the art of creating content that follows a shared set of rules and guidelines.

Creative people often have a strong reaction to the word standardization. The term connotes a realm of gray, rectangular, dull, and noncreative content. It triggers feelings of confinement and resistance.

Standards indeed affect creativity, but business writing is not about creating poetry or inventing an entirely new way to quantify the universe. Business writing is about producing useful content that serves business needs and provides a personalized experience for customers at scale.

On the other hand, standards take the place of repetitive decision-making, reinventing the wheel, and redesigning from the ground up every single time. Standards provide the measurements, blueprints, and principles that allow creative people to build personalized content experiences much more quickly than starting over from scratch every time.

The Five Dimensions of Standardization

The main reason for standardizing content is to facilitate content reuse. Content reuse is the secret to personalizing content experiences at scale.

Seamless content reuse is only possible when you standardize everything. Without standards, differences in terminology, style, voice, and even component structure can disrupt the customer experience. Generally speaking, consumers turn to technical documentation when they experience a disruption. They may need to learn something new about your product or overcome difficulties that prevent them from using your product. That's why providing them with the smoothest content experience possible is especially important.

To personalize successfully, you must standardize these five dimensions of your content:

- **Output types.** Output types provide blueprints for assembling content for delivery.
- **Components.** Components are independent units of content that can be combined with other components and reused where needed.
- **Paragraphs.** Paragraph standards define the voice and tone of your content.
- **Sentences.** Grammar and style rules govern how words are combined and ensure harmony across multiple writers.
- **Words.** Consistent terminology increases reader comprehension, builds your brand, and improves content findability.

Why Do Personalization Efforts Fail?

The number one reason companies fail at personalization is that they do not standardize their content first. They think only about the result—the published content—and spend massive amounts of money, time, and energy attempting to match that content to the right customer at the right time.

To succeed at delivering personalized experiences at scale, you have to standardize your content. There's no way around it.

And that's why we've written our latest book, *The Personalization Paradox: Why Companies Fail (and How to Succeed) at Delivering Personalized Experiences at Scale.* In it, we show you how to create personalized content experiences at scale.

VAL SWISHER *is the Founder and CEO of Content Rules, Inc.*
REGINA LYNN PRECIADO *is a Senior Content Strategist with Content Rules, Inc. They enjoy helping companies solve complex content problems.*

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STC Scholarships Awarded to Meghalee Das of Texas Tech University and Nieve Funston of Iowa State University

THE STC SCHOLARSHIP Committee is excited to congratulate the recipients of the 2021 STC Scholarship. Meghalee Das and Nieve Funston have each been awarded a $500 scholarship for the 2021-2022 school year. They also received a student membership in STC and the opportunity to volunteer at SUMMIT.

Meghalee Das, a graduate student at Texas Tech University, is pursuing a PhD in Technical Communication. Das is awarded this honor for her innovative and active research agenda in remote user experience research and usability testing, demonstration of exemplary teaching, and substantial scholarly contributions to her community. Her faculty describe her as having "evidenced curiosity, a drive for complexity, and an interest in furthering our field's understanding of global and intercultural technical communication and pedagogy."

Nieve Funston, an undergraduate student at Iowa State University, is pursuing a dual major in Linguistics and Technical Communication. Funston is awarded this honor for her insightful research and articulation of technical communication and rhetorical theories in topics ranging from renewable energy to dance. She is recognized by her peers and professors for advancing class discussions beyond surface-level thought in ways that motivate and challenge those around her. Her faculty describe her as "wicked smart, hardworking, and curious."

To qualify for an STC scholarship, applicants must have completed at least one year of post-secondary education. They must be working toward a degree or a graduate certificate in communication of information about technical subjects, and they must have at least one full year of academic work remaining. If they meet all of these requirements, then applicants submit applications, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and essays that show their goals and achievements and their experience in technical communication, as well as an understanding of technical communication trends.

Applications were evaluated by the Scholarship Committee, whose members had a tough choice to make, as there were many good candidates. The Committee's purpose is to assist students who are pursuing an accredited degree or graduate certificate program in some aspect of technical communication. They recommend to the STC Board of Directors policies and procedures for awarding Society-level scholarships and grants, provide oversight and recommendations for geographic community scholarships and grants, review applications for scholarships and grants, and recommend scholarship and grant recipients. The Committee consists of STC members at varying points in their careers and is chaired by Kylie Jacobsen.

Support STC scholarships! Make a donation at **www.stc.org/support-stc-now.**

Introducing the 2021 Class of STC Fellows

STC IS PROUD to announce that five STC Associate Fellows have been elevated to the rank of Fellow.

Becoming an STC Fellow is a lifelong journey of achievement. The honor is conferred by the Society upon Associate Fellows who have continued to make exemplary contributions that advance the profession of technical communication. The complete list of requirements for this honor can be found on the Fellows page. For a complete list of all honorees who have achieved this milestone, see the Historical List of STC Fellows. bit.ly/2NUgH2G.

The STC Board thanks the Fellows committee—Nicky Bleiel (Chair), Cindy Currie, Hillary Hart, and Linda Oestreich—for their work this year.

The new STC Fellows will be honored at the 2021 STC Virtual Summit this June. Congratulations to all the honorees!

Scott P. Abel

For providing educational opportunities for technical communicators via conferences, books, webinars, articles, and blogs, and for interdisciplinary promotion of the profession.

Aslihan Ugur Akinci

For superb contribution to the profession through international publication in many media, dedicated mentorship of students and colleagues, and steadfast leadership of the Washington, DC-Baltimore chapter.

Ray Gallon

For continuing and rigorous contributions to the field of technical communication as a globally aware and culturally sensitive practitioner, mentor, and professor with a deep devotion to his students all over the world.

John Garison

For exemplary dedication, support, and enthusiasm for technical communication, especially for steadfast and ongoing instruction and mentorship of others within the workplace and the Society.

Roberta (Bobbi) Werner

For outstanding mentorship and development of technical communication leaders, strong commitment to best practices in the workplace, and ongoing and rigorous support of STC communities.

Presenting the 2021 Class of Associate Fellows

THE SOCIETY FOR Technical Communication is proud to announce the 2021 class of Associate Fellows. Associate Fellow is one of the three honorary ranks in the Society. It is the second highest rank that the Society can confer upon a member, Fellow being the highest. This honor recognizes members for their outstanding achievements in, and contributions to, the arts and science of technical communication, and for sustained and significant service to STC.

Associate Fellows retain this honorary rank for life, unless they are elevated to the rank of Fellow.

To be considered for Associate Fellow, a candidate must have:

- Been active in technical communication for at least 15 years.
- Fulfilled 10 years of service as an STC Member (with at least five years at the level of Senior Member), as of the application submission deadline

The Society will formally recognize the new Associate Fellows at the 2021 STC Virtual Summit.

Congratulations to our newest Associate Fellows:

Alisa Bonsignore

For building professional development resources that advance communicators' careers; for developing long-term strategic programs for STC; and for drawing attention to how effective communication can benefit organizations and society.

Jamie Gillenwater

For contributions and commitment to the STC certification program, which provides technical communicators with opportunities for growth and elevates the profession.

Debra Johnson

For significant contributions to, promotion of, and innovation in the profession; love for its practitioners and students; and distinguished service as an STC and industry leader.

Wendy Ross

For helping others develop professionally; for outstanding leadership of the STC Rochester chapter; and for pioneering work in diversity, equity, and inclusion for the Society for Technical Communication and other organizations.

Yoel Strimling

For improving documentation through his empirically based feedback model, and for providing the STC Technical Editing SIG with a platform for robust and intellectually rigorous information exchange.

Jane Wilson

For her persistent promotion of the value of technical communication; for commitment to continuous improvement of teams and processes; and for her service as an STC leader.

Sigma Tau Chi and Alpha Sigma Honor Societies Inductees

THE STUDENT HONORARY societies Sigma Tau Chi (STX) and Alpha Sigma (AS) recognize student members of the Society who have distinguished themselves as students and have demonstrated promise of future contributions to the Society and the profession.

Membership in STX is an honor given to students enrolled in a program in technical communication, who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or above, are exemplary in participation in STC, and demonstrate a potential for significant contribution to the profession.

Membership in AS is an honor given to students enrolled in a program in technical communication who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or above, demonstrate active participation in STC, and have the potential to contribute to the profession.

Membership is awarded only once and honorees retain the membership only as long as they are members in good standing of the Society.

The 2021 inductees are:

- Sigma Tau Chi: Nathan Richardson, University of Maine
- Alpha Sigma: Julia Barnes, Michigan Technological University

Thank you to the STX/AS Honor Societies Committee (Michael McCarthy (Chair), Dr. Julie Gerdes, Dr. Leah Heilig, and Dr. Kylie Jacobsen) for their work on this.

Two Recipients of the Jay R. Gould Award

THE JAY R. GOULD Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication honors the distinguished teaching career of Professor Gould, whose academic mentorship of technical communication students guided many men and women into the profession. The award was initiated to acknowledge the importance of academic programs to the science and practice of technical communication, and to encourage excellence in the academic community by honoring those who have made an outstanding contribution to teaching the body of knowledge in this area. Innovative and creative teacher-scholars, the recipients of this award have a record of successful students and a pattern of acting as a mentor, which is exemplified by being inspirational and involved in student activities outside the classroom. In addition, their research has contributed to changes in the way technical communication is taught. There are two recipients for the 2021 award.

- Ann Hill Duin, University of Minnesota: For a lifetime of modeling and mentoring hundreds: a teacher and international scholar who has led by example and "gone above and beyond" to help students navigate the inevitable challenges of communicating across cultures and technologies.
- Stuart Selber, Penn State University: For his ability to carve out an intellectual space about pedagogy, introduce novel ideas at every level of the curriculum, and build frameworks that cross over from academic to organizational and industry settings.

Thank you to the Jay R. Gould Award committee (Dr. Sally Henschel (Chair), Carol Luttrell, Bruce Maylath, and Shelly Thomas) for their work on this.

Ken Rainey Award

Ken Rainey was a professor at Southern Polytechnic State University (now Kennesaw State University) and STC Fellow who produced major research studies that continue to provide ongoing benefit to both practice and teaching in the field of technical communication.

The Ken Rainey Award honors research that has made positive, significant contributions to technical communication practice and teaching. It rewards a lifetime of quality research in the field, a single high-quality empirical study, or a set of related high-quality studies. The 2021 award recipient is

- David Farkas, University of Washington: For contributing, in a career spanning decades, an impressive body of research in technical communication, repeatedly demonstrating the ability to make that research accessible across academic and industry communities.

Thank you to the Jay R. Gould Award committee (Miles Kimball (Chair) and Steve Jong) for their work on this.

IN MEMORIAM: Sherri Smith
27 October 1944–9 September 2020

BY LINDA OESTREICH | *STC Fellow and* **DEIRDRE MURR** | *STC Fellow*

SHERRI E. SMITH, STC Fellow, passed away suddenly on 9 September 2020. She was a teacher and a skilled technical communicator who enjoyed a career that spanned more than four decades.

Sherri joined STC in 1975, acting in various local and international STC capacities for more than 30 years. Sherri, a member of the Houston Chapter (now STC South Central Texas), received her STC Fellow honor in 2000. Her first leadership role at the international level of STC occurred in 1981, when she ran for a spot on the Nominating Committee. It didn't take long for her to move up to the STC Board of Directors as Director-Sponsor from 1987 to 1990 and then to serve as an Assistant to the President for Recognition from 1991 to 1994. She received the Distinguished Chapter Service Award from the Houston Chapter in 1994, having served in almost all offices available, including as President from 1980 to 1981 and as a member of the award-winning *Dateline Houston* newsletter team. Another of her crowning glories was serving as Conference Manager for the 1985 STC Annual Conference, held in Houston; it still reigns as one of the biggest and most successful STC Annual Conferences ever held.

A prolific communicator and manager, she supported STC programs and competitions, winning multiple publication awards, including two awards of Distinguished Technical Communication from STC Houston, two Awards of Excellence from the Society's International Competition, a Gold Quill Award from the International Association of Business Communicators, and a Matrix Award from Women in Communication.

To those who knew Sherri, she was a bright light, albeit one who was vertically challenged! As AP for Recognition, she needed a soapbox to stand on so she could see over the lectern when she spoke at STC Annual Banquets.

Sherri shared her full life and caring spirit with her STC colleagues and her work associates. Her career included a decade at Brown & Root, a few years at Saba Communications developing astronaut training materials at NASA, almost two decades at Compaq/Hewlett Packard, and then a return to Saba Communications as a contract writer for another decade or more. Her forte was in marketing and curriculum design, and she did both extremely well.

A graduate of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, she also studied technical communication at the graduate level at the University of Houston. Her people skills and problem-solving abilities were unmatched.

In the past 20-plus years, though, Sherri had a second passion: miniature poodles! As recently as 31 August 2020, just nine days before she died, she posted this about one of her poodles: "Ariel won her first Major going BOV over a Special for the win! One more for her CH! Long time coming! So proud of her & Betty!" We don't know what half of that means, but we know it meant the world to her. She loved her dogs and her career. She was funny, intuitive, loving, kind, and a big presence in STC for decades. A longtime STC Executive Director called her "bubbly," and indeed, she was!

Sherri was an only child with no children, but she is survived by 11 first cousins—all of whom were close. One of them, Melodi, was her traveling companion and champagne drinking buddy. (Sherri loved champagne!). Melodi posted this on Sherri's Facebook page:

> At this time there will not be a funeral or memorial service and the family requests that no one send flowers. There are plans to have a service in the Spring in San Saba, TX, where Sherri will be laid to rest next to her beloved parents, Glenn and Perky Smith. I will keep Sherri's Facebook account open for anyone who would like to post a story or memory of Sherri and I will notify her Facebook friends when the service in San Saba will take place.
>
> In lieu of cards or flowers, a donation to one of the following, in Sherri's memory, is suggested:
>
> Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America: *https://secure.aafa.org/np/clients/aafa/donation.jsp.*
>
> American Civil Liberties Union: *https://action.aclu.org/give/make-gift-aclu-someones-memory.*
>
> Poodle Club of America Foundation: *http://poodleclubofamericafoundation.org/donate.*
>
> Sherri had so many friends and colleagues and our family welcomes any of you to arrange your own memorial gathering or tribute to Sherri—virtual or otherwise. And maybe raise a glass of wine to her memory—champagne was Sherri's favorite!

She was a shining light who will be missed. We already miss her mightily.

Rest in peace, dear Sherri.

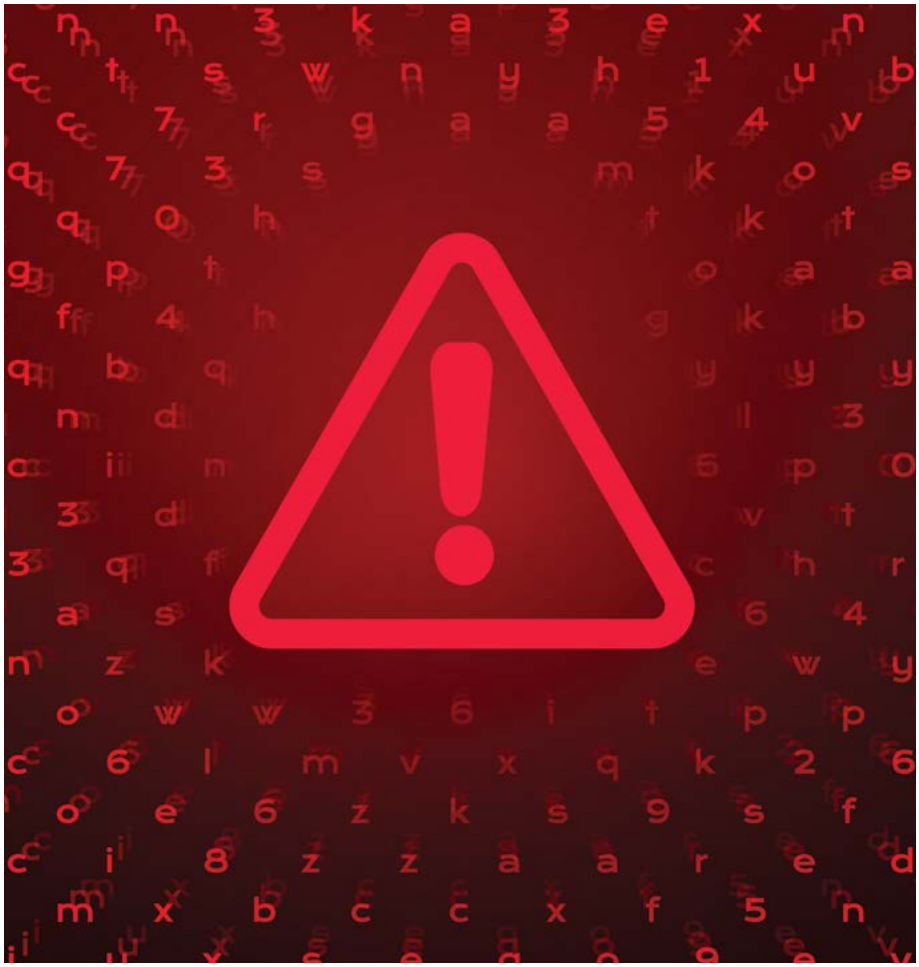
The Risks of Risk Communication During a Pandemic

BY AKSHATA J. BALGHARE

IN JANUARY 2020, University Health Services at the University of California, Berkeley (UCB) shared an informational handout on its Instagram page that focused on "managing fears and anxiety" about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), shown in Figure 1. With an intent to offer mental health tips and resources, the infographic identified a handful of "normal reactions" that people might experience during the crisis. Surprisingly, the post listed "xenophobia" as one of the normal reactions, defining *xenophobia* as "fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about those feelings." This post received an extensive backlash for normalizing xenophobia, which hurts Asian, as well as other foreign, populations. The Health Services Center later deleted the post and issued an apology. UCB's fiasco brings to light how risk communicators can unintentionally encourage acts that may sound biased, exclusionist, or even racist while also undermining their real message.

Tang Center at Cal
@TangCenterCal
We apologize for our recent post on managing anxiety around Coronavirus. We regret any misunderstanding it may have caused and have updated the language in our materials.

Figure 1. UCB apologizes for offensive COVID-19 Instagram post.



Communication experts Reynolds and Quinn (2008, 16S) mention that the responsibility of risk communicators is to construct messages "that will reduce illnesses, save lives, and maintain societal structures." A message like the one from UCB, however, disrupts beneficial societal structures and stimulates unwanted behavioral changes. The World Health Organization and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention communication guidelines are based on building a relationship of trust between communicators and audiences, a trust that tells the public that they should believe the communicator and take risk measures per the received information (Abraham 2011). In that case, is UCB asking audiences to trust that xenophobia is normal and that the university is not unintentionally harming their own foreign population? Their message could have resulted in UCB damaging its trust with its foreign population and those who care about them.

COVID-19, which originated in China, spread globally, and people of Chinese or Asian descent have been harassed and

treated differently, leading to a pandemic of xenophobic behavior and fearmongering around the world. "In the United States, as the infection emerged, more than 1,000 media reports of racism and xenophobia against Asian Americans were recorded between January and February 2020" (Kandil CY 2020, as cited in Ng 2020, 1158).

Such xenophobic attitudes were also detected previously during the 2003 SARS outbreak. For example, Chinese immigrants in New York were stigmatized and blamed by other residents in the community in response to the uncertainty that surrounded SARS at the time (Eichelberger 2007, as cited in Wirz et al. 2018, 2602). Both Ding (2007) and Sontag identify that xenophobic propaganda have always depicted immigrants as bearers of disease (Sontag 2003, as cited in Ferguson 2019, 144).

Some of this xenophobic behavior could have resulted from the way COVID-19 information was communicated. In the case of global epidemics, there is a high chance of risk communication messages harming vulnerable populations. Rhetoric such as referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus," and the "kung-flu" has been promoted by some US leaders, "providing the necessary oxygen to fan the flames of hate and discrimination against members of the targeted communities" (Ng 2020, 1158). Additionally, "many reports on COVID-19 also include a picture of an Asian person wearing a mask" (Gee, Ro, and Rimoin 2020, 955). Wardman (2008, 1620) warns us that "even when risk communication has been implemented in good faith and according to plan, it seems that the possibility for 'effective' risk communication is far from certain and that in some instances it may in fact do more harm than good."

A few missteps can trigger loss of trust in the expert's ability to communicate about the crisis, leading to unexpected and highly undesirable outcomes for minority and marginalized populations (Vaughan and Tinker 2009, S324). For example, a message that attacks and blames the Chinese population can have spillover effects to other communities, causing members of other Asian subgroups (e.g., Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese) to also become targets of anti-Chinese discrimination (Gee, Ro, and Rimoin 2020, 954). Gee, Ro, and Rimoin (2020) point out that people experiencing discrimination might opt to hide out and not get tested or treated, which could skew COVID-19 data and our understanding of the disease. Consequently, such individuals may suffer through the disease by avoiding treatment owing to the fear of discrimination and hostility.

This contradicts what we want to achieve as risk communicators, and so we must experiment with ways to construct a reasoned dialog involving different stakeholders, especially during pandemics when multicultural stakeholders are involved. Ding (2013) suggests that experts consider the public's emotions, attitudes, and cultural values to make better risk policies, communicate more effectively about risk measures, and produce more desirable outcomes, especially during transcultural risk communication.

In addition to the abovementioned strategies by Ding, we should consider the following: "What elements of a message or a communication context are likely to enhance or diminish the persuasive effect of a message? What elements of the message are remembered, and which ones trigger changes in opinions or attitudes?" (Renn 1992, 484). *IEEE ProComm* (2020) recently posted an article discussing how choosing active verb forms and emphasizing personal responsibility by using the right subjects can provoke the public to take personal actions as a means of addressing the problem. Their article "Language Choices in Times of Crisis" recommends saying "'you' and 'we' are spreading the virus" because those words underscore the reader's role in the spread, emphasizing personal responsibility.

This suggests that when communicating about a risk to the public, considering "agency" and the way of addressing agents is central. However, even though we consider agency, we may face challenges crafting appropriate messages around risk using language and rhetoric that fits within the expectations of all cultural populations. In the case of UCB, the message does not address all of its agents because it only speaks to people who are not Asian/Chinese, and it subtly attributes blame to the Asian/Chinese population for the disease. In this way, the message ignores the role of non-Asian populations in the spread of COVID-19 on UCB's campus.

While COVID-19 harms some populations more than others

The Student Perspectives column provides insights, experiences, research, and more from students across technical communication. We're proud to introduce new voices, inject new ideas, and give the practitioners of tomorrow a platform to begin publishing their thought leadership today! Column editor Ryan Weber teaches technical communication at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and hosts the podcast 10-Minute Tech Comm. Contact him at *rw0019@uah.edu* to submit or pitch a column idea.

based on their access to healthcare or privilege to socially distance or stay home, we should not forget that "we're" all at risk, and COVID-19 can infect anyone regardless of their race, religious belief, gender, or sexual orientation. As technical communicators, we must design risk messages using language that is free of stereotypes, cultural insensitivity, sexism, or any sort of discrimination. Our role is of symbolic analysts and user advocates when communicating risk information, and we possess the ability to create user knowledge in risk communication processes (Grabill and Simmons 1998, as cited in Ding 2013, 127). Thus, we must be mindful of the messages we construct as risk communicators because our messages create crisis management knowledge for the public. Accordingly, our messages must consider suitable agency, be credible and ethical, and address agents in ways that motivate them to take the right actions.

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When You're Weary: Avoiding Editing Burnout

BY MICHELLE CORBIN | *STC Fellow*

AS I WRITE this in early September 2020, we are six to seven months into dealing with the global COVID-19 pandemic, and I think most people are starting to feel a bit weary—or even a bit of burnout—from it. The burnout we feel from dealing with the pandemic is much the same as the burnout we can feel in our careers. I have dealt with career burnout twice so far in my career, and I'm working really hard to not hit it again, right now, because I don't need a double whammy of burnout in both my personal and professional lives.

What Is Burnout?

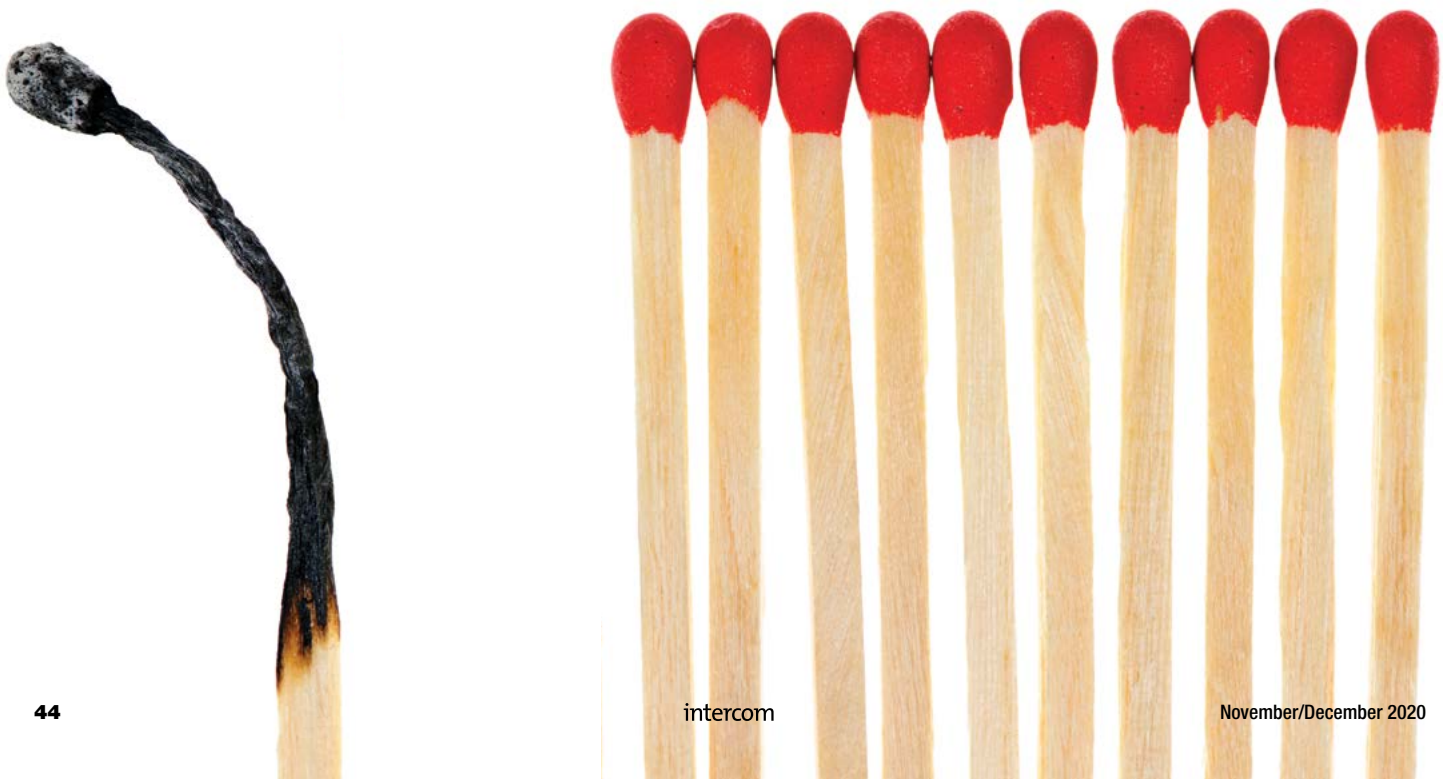
If you do an online search for "avoiding burnout" (Google suggests "avoiding burnout during COVID-19") or "treating burnout," you will find a variety of useful articles and resources from healthcare sites like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mayo Clinic, and *Healthline,* and also from business magazines like *Forbes* and *Inc.*, and, of course, articles from news sources like *The New York Times* and BBC. (The resources at the end of this column are the collection that I consulted as I wrote this. I encourage you to explore them, and others, for yourself.)

The best definition of burnout that I found was in a *Healthline* article: *Burnout* is a "severe stress condition" and a "state of mental and physical exhaustion that can zap the joy out of your career" (and life in general these days). I find burnout to be a paralyzing condition that has affected me in these ways as a technical editor:

- Procrastination and missing deadlines
- Decision fatigue
- Apathy and detachment

Procrastination and Missing Deadlines

Early in my career, I became a maniacal time manager. I devoured everything by Stephen Covey (of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* fame) to start, and I dabbled a bit with David Allen (of *Getting Things Done* fame). So, later in my career, when I started procrastinating and missing deadlines on some of the more basic tasks each week, I knew something was up. As



a technical editor, it is especially important to not miss deadlines, otherwise the writers whom you support will also miss deadlines (or they'll simply just ignore your work to make their deadlines, which is totally counterproductive).

Decision Fatigue

Another key symptom or issue with burnout is decision fatigue. Every single decision is just too much to handle. As a technical editor (and a technical writer), you constantly make decisions about the content you create. From what content to add or remove, to how to organize the content, to the use of passive voice, to the use of commas, you have to make a lot of decisions about what's best for your users or what the style guide says you should do related to a grammar or style issue. When decision fatigue plagues you, it leads back to procrastination. It also leads you down the dark path of apathy and detachment.

Apathy and Detachment

If there is one thing that technical editors cannot be, it is apathetic. As the arbiters of quality, technical editors have to care about all the details and standards that go into delivering high-quality content. We are often the first readers, or first users, of the content. If we feel detached from our quality assurance processes, our users will definitely suffer.

Beating Burnout

What can we do to avoid burnout? How can we beat it? Here is a list of tactics that I have compiled from my research. I have tried and used some of these to beat burnout in the past, and I'm using them today in dealing with the pandemic burnout that's bleeding over into some work burnout:

- First and foremost, take care of your physical needs. Eat well, exercise, go outside, and sleep more.
- Secondly, do not suffer in silence. Talk with your manager, your colleagues, your family, and your friends about the feelings of exhaustion, overwhelmedness, escapism, or irritability that are all a part of burnout.
- Break large tasks down into smaller ones. Document your accomplishments both small and large. Small wins really help combat the mental burnout.
- Take breaks throughout the day. Walk away from the work for a bit.
- Set boundaries for work. Keep them. Do the things that you enjoy doing outside of work.
- Take your vacation time! The longer breaks (even just a few long weekends every so often) from the stress and overwhelmedness will help. If your burnout is bad enough, take two weeks off, focus on taking care of yourself, and see if you can come back refreshed from the break. (Of course, in these pandemic times, it is really hard to take vacations.)
- Last, if you are still struggling, change up your job if you can. Figure out what work you love and what work you dislike, and try to do more of what you love more often. Find ways to tweak how you do your job.

In Editing Matters, Michelle Corbin covers matters (topics) about editing that matter (are of consequence) to communicators of all kinds. Watch this space to understand more about editing and what you can do to improve the quality of your content. To suggest a topic or ask a question, contact Michelle at *michelle.l.corbin@gmail.com.*

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Connecting with Research: Knowledge Mobilization and Social Media

BY THOMAS BARKER | *STC Fellow*

RESEARCHERS ARE FINDING ways to broaden the audience for their research findings. Knowledge mobilization through social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Research Gate, and other platforms, provides some ways to do that. In this column, I explore knowledge mobilization itself, some of the platforms available to communication and technical communication researchers that can help researchers connect, and an example of knowledge mobilization in practice.

What Is Knowledge Mobilization?

First, let's define some terms. *Knowledge mobilization* and *knowledge transfer* are often used interchangeably. They don't mean the same thing. Both are ways of communicating research results, but *knowledge mobilization* is the broader term. It encompasses a variety of activities that contextualize research data.

Knowledge transfer, on the other hand, is often used to refer to the channeling of results, data, and implications into this or that targeted arena. Little happens to the content of transferred knowledge; mobilized knowledge is shaped and tailored to an audience's information needs.

Research Impact Canada maintains a long list of terms associated with research and research communication, but its definition of knowledge mobilization is a great starting point. According to Research Impact Canada, knowledge mobilization is an umbrella term that covers a lot of activities and outcomes:

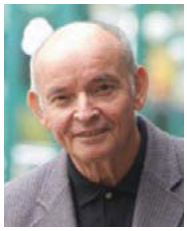
> *Knowledge mobilization* means brokering relationships between researchers and non-academic research partners so that research and evidence can inform decisions and understanding about public policy, professional practice and other applications. Knowledge mobilization services include methods of knowledge transfer, knowledge translation and exchange, and extend them to include the co-production of knowledge. Knowledge mobilization turns research into action.

Let's briefly unpack some of the ideas in this definition. The elements of "relationships" and "co-production" mean that knowledge mobilization enables sharing rather than a downstream trickle. Policy and practice stakeholders provide key directions and validations of knowledge, something researchers desperately need. Mobilization "extends" knowledge into action. In this way, the definition touches on what is productive in research, something that was not always top of mind among academics.

The Then and The Now

First, understand the way research was before the advent of social media and knowledge mobilization. For many of us, the usual audience for our research was other researchers: academics with an interest in our academic conversions, research questions, classroom applications, funding opportunities, and, yes, results. Those who might actually benefit from our findings—industry leaders, government policy makers, health authorities, and the vast numbers of doctors, lawyers, managers, and workers—got to stand by and watch. Journals, like our beloved *Technical Communication,* tossed tidbits of information to practitioners by incorporating things like "takeaways" at the beginning of articles. Practitioners I have spoken to have never been satisfied with these *handouts*—a term used for brief summaries of research given out at conferences.

What has changed? For one thing, research itself has moved toward greater relevance all around. And with that greater relevance comes expanded involvement with, and obligations to, research subjects. Critical studies we undertake are "open" from the start: Research questions, methods, data analysis, and conclusions are all negotiable with the actual people being



This column focuses on a broad range of practical academic issues from teaching and training to professional concerns, research, and technologies of interest to teachers, students, and researchers. Please send comments and suggestions to column editor Thomas Barker at *ttbarker@ualberta.ca.*

studied. Terms for this kind of research include "participatory action research," "community-based research," "collaborative research," and "stakeholder engagement." At their core, these research trends all lean in the same direction: toward knowledge mobilization from the grassroots up.

Participate, a network of research organizations focused on grassroots poverty and marginalization issues, defines participatory research as follows:

> *Participatory research* comprises a range of methodological approaches and techniques, all with the objective of handing power from the researcher to research participants, who are often community members or community-based organisations. In participatory research, participants have control over the research agenda, the process, and actions. Most importantly, people themselves are the ones who analyse and reflect on the information generated, in order to obtain the findings and conclusions of the research process.

Participatory methods and aims go hand in hand with social media engagement. Movements love Twitter and Facebook as platforms providing access to social organizations. These platforms bring people together and provide a channel for citizens to interact with researchers. Knowledge mobilization is not like a lump of data with wheels. It means the cocreation of knowledge. Let's look at an example.

A Sample Project: The Healthy Workplaces Wellness Links Blog

In my province of Alberta, upward of 20,000 workers are in the nonprofit, community services sector and almost 500 nonprofit agencies. This includes child welfare, foster care, women's shelters, disability services, and home visitation for the elderly. Most of these agencies rely on government contracts and other grants or endowments in a disaggregated system that is extremely dependent on government systems of commercialization, privatization, and outsourcing. That is the funding and the service model. At the center of it are a handful of advocacy, training, and professional support associations. I work with and through these associations top down, but I'm using knowledge mobilization to start to build community from the bottom up.

Backed by a grant from Research Impact Canada, I am pushing a knowledge mobilization project—the Healthy Workplaces for Helping Professions project—that is a little different from the usual. This project was conceived in 2015 as a research project into the factors affecting workplace engagement and psychosocial (mental) health and stress in nonprofit community service employees. The formal survey and reporting phase of the project is over. We created a report, a wellness framework, training materials, and a data set, all available online. We institutionalized the concepts in a Workplace Wellness series (three courses) in our university's continuing education program, and we funded a Wellness Award that acts as a scholarship (called a *bursary* in Canada). This is where such a project (out of funding) would normally close down.

However, the project is alive today, mainly because of knowledge mobilization, a concept that allows me to employ social media as a

grassroots channel to frontline workers. The concept is straightforward: I create a blog post (content) using data that otherwise would go onto the dust heap. What was our dust heap? When we mobilized our knowledge back in 2017, we collected and filed away comments from our workshops that answered the question, "What strategies do you use at your agency to stay sane?" Since last December, a social media team and I have been mobilizing the list of about 150 tips, all straight from frontline workers. The effort, known as the Wellness Links Blog, takes these tips one at a time and shapes them, using our research results as a frame. Taking a tip as a prompt, I research corporate and training agency websites and some academic sources to add value. Voila: A blog article is created.

How does social media come in? Start a WordPress blog and Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts, and you're in business. The blog essentially contains the content, and the social media channels handle the downstream promotion of the ideas, adding commentary through quote retweets and Facebook and Instagram comments and posts. After we created about 25 social posts, we shifted to a social listening posture, focusing on posts and tweets by professional associations and individual agencies. The key here is to find opportunities for content provision and then provide it, so the next round of blog articles can be even more targeted, and we can begin to build a broad, knowledge-mobilization community.

The Value in Knowledge Mobilization

This broadening and adding value is where I think the real promise of knowledge mobilization lies. Researchers have long bemoaned the waste of unused data. An industry report, as described by Jeff Barrett (@barrettall) claims that roughly 73% of data "goes unused" for analytics. And this is in the context of big data. (Don't get me started on the oil spill of data from the Internet of Things.) Barrett cites a source claiming that "almost 85% of these industries let this data sourced from trillions of data points go unused." Data mining is one approach to these points, but knowledge mobilization by actual researchers can do a much better job after they first overcome institutional barriers.

It is not that researchers failed to recognize a trend toward knowledge mobilization. One study in 2008 claimed an "explosion of interest" in connecting research and evidence with policy and practice. But 10 years later, another study in the *Canadian Journal of Higher Education* sadly reported that "researchers spend less than 10% of their time on non-academic outreach." Luckily, in Canada, several voices continue to emphasize the importance of connecting research to stakeholders, seeing the benefits of knowledge sharing, and, in the case of research with Indigenous partners, giving over control of questions, analytics, and data to the people from whom the data were collected. Unfortunately, studies show that supports for knowledge mobilization either do not exist, or, where they do, they are little used by researchers.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the concept of knowledge mobilization is complicated and interesting. It is not just transfer. Social media and the bottom-up approach of everyday media, like Twitter and Instagram, provide pathways and tools to do what knowledge mobilization is supposed to do: Deliver a quality, value-added context for—and access to—the world of academic knowledge. To do this, as shown in the Healthy Workplaces example, requires both a strategy for disseminating and a strategy for listening. Social media approaches hold promise for exploiting everything from leftover data sets to vast sets of unused data points, ready for mining. For industry and social service stakeholders, the promise is yet more evidence in the search for evidence-based policy and practice. For academia, the promise is free and transparent research environments, representing partnerships in knowledge creation. i

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The Content Services Organization: Powering the Information-Enabled Enterprise

Intelligent content starts with new organizational structures and effective content supply chains

BY CRUCE SAUNDERS

An Evolving Landscape

The steady evolution toward information-enabled enterprises continues without pause. As modular knowledge assets shape all customer and internal experiences, the processes surrounding that knowledge and its expressions as content continue to change and adapt.

Static content artifacts created with document or web "page"-oriented methods are no longer flexible enough to respond to modern customers' needs across channels. Now, all clients have unique combinations of platforms and architectures running content across departments and channels. Technical diversity is natural, and there is yet no magic-bullet tool to make content modular and ready to serve customers.

Dealing with content through software can be both a solution and a silo unto itself. In the face of constant change, lasting stability only emerges when content and processes work in and around technology. Content only becomes intelligent enough to create an information-enabled enterprise through specific disciplines and processes built around that content. Therefore, content requires a real organization responsible for it.

[A], in practice with clients, has built a sustainable management approach we call the Content Services Organization (CSO). The CSO organizational model is briefly described here and in depth in the "[A] Guide to the Content Services Organization."

The CSO is in development and operation with some of the most complex enterprise publishers in the world. Today, CSOs are in development and in active practice in healthcare, pharmaceuticals, banking, nonprofit, software, and technology firms. [A] models client Content Intelligence Teams and

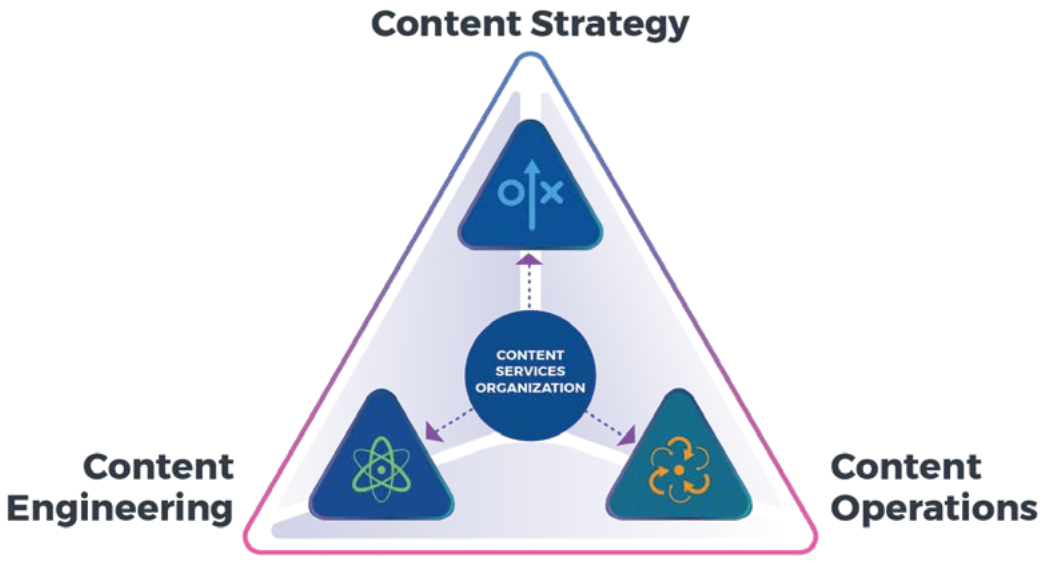

Figure 1. Content Services Organization functional practices.

Publishers face many challenges creating a new operating model and orchestration approach for dynamic omnichannel content. This column addresses the changing content ecosystem and the evolving dynamics in the space. Questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email *editorial@simplea.com*.

our own organization structure in alignment with the CSO framework. Because the CSO approach is so straightforward, we believe any organization, of any size, can learn from adopting it in some form.

What Is a Content Services Organization?

The CSO is a chartered function within an enterprise that has the ultimate responsibility for the content supply chain. The CSO contains content practice leadership, including strategy, engineering, and operations. The CSO organizes content and content processes to support publishing groups to build and deliver intelligent content.

The CSO has three functional practices that exist together, within a permanent, chartered function, as shown in Figure 1.

Content strategy is an essential planning activity that identifies the content an organization should acquire, manage, and leverage. It also sets the stage for how that content is intended to be used across platforms, audiences, and devices. Content strategy organizes vision. We can think of content strategy as the CEO of content, setting direction, measuring success, and optimizing for shareholder needs and market conditions.

Content engineering is the application of engineering discipline to the design, acquisition, management, delivery, and use of content and content technologies used to support the full content lifecycle. Content engineers and related semantics experts organize the shape, structure, and application of content by handling structure and semantics, the Core Content Model, taxonomies, and tagging standards.

We can think of content engineering as the CTO of content, managing all the data-level details that help the content parts of the business run smoothly and making it possible to deliver modular Content-as-a-Service (CaaS).

Content operations is the organizational practice that performs the day-to-day business of acquiring, managing, and leveraging content. Content operations collaborates directly with content strategy and content engineering, facilitating the day-to-day application of the Content Orchestration Model across authoring, localization, content management, and related teams.

We can think of content operations as the COO of content, running the day-to-day business of content, managing standards, working with IT, facilitating interactions with stakeholder groups, and making sure that the people, process, and technology pieces all come together.

> Whether content is internal or external facing, it is a durable asset with real value. Implementing a CSO enables us to get intentional about content.

Why Intelligent Content Matters

Content originates from virtually every function within an organization, spanning pre-sales to post-sales. It is the basis for all customer experience.

For most of us, content is just plain hard. It's manual. It's unorganized. Major effort is involved in moving content manually from system to system, silo to silo, language to language, channel to channel, and server to server.

How do we evolve? How do we embrace the new age of intelligent content?

Whether content is internal or external facing, it is a durable asset with real value. Implementing a CSO enables us to get intentional about content. We need to make sure our content workflows are efficient and effective. Many of us need to move away from document management to flowing, dynamic content elements. We need to architect and manage a real content supply chain. We do this by bringing together the content strategy, engineering, and operations practices. This enables us to produce next-generation intelligent customer experiences.

Intelligent customer experiences are based on intelligent content, which has been previously structured and contextualized so that it can flow efficiently and effectively between people and applications, deliver individually optimized customer experiences at scale, and maximize the return on the investment made in its acquisition and management.

How the Content Services Organization Produces Value

Content intelligence is a core organizational capability that emerges when an organization modernizes the methods it uses to acquire, manage, and leverage intelligent content. An organization with content intelligence will have the ability to broadly scale its delivery of next-generation customer experiences, learn about its market and customers based on how its content is used, and adapt in real time to what it has learned.

The enablement of an organization to realize, sustain, and evolve its content intelligence through a CSO makes many benefits possible:

- **Scalability.** Development of intelligent, responsive content empowers enterprises to meet the

demands of expanding content channels, formats, and platforms.

- **Context and personalization.** The coordination of content strategy and engineering produces intelligent content with metadata that makes it easier to find and helps identify the context necessary for on-demand personalization.
- **Cost reduction.** Modular content becomes far more flexible for reuse and can be discovered in entirely new ways. These benefits are shared across authoring teams.
- **Increased customer retention.** The CSO reduces friction in the content supply chain. This ultimately touches everything else across the customer journey, and leads to increased customer satisfaction and retention.

Since customers now begin their journey on almost any touchpoint (and from almost any device), modular and component-based content is essential. Building structured content modules and working with content more like data objects enables content to be dynamically assembled in many ways, meeting the customer's needs in real time.

Scalability and Scope of the Content Services Organization

The CSO can function at any scale: It can start and run at the department level, or it can be built out at an enterprise-wide scope. The more scope it has, the more valuable it is because more connections are created and duplicated content is further reduced.

The enterprise usually builds up a cross-functional CSO over time, starting with an empowered team focused on improving content production. With a CSO in place, content from different groups can finally become an integrated whole, delivering shared core content to the rest of the enterprise, within product, and to partners and customers. Through content intelligence, customer experiences can start to evolve from ad hoc, functional interactions to real, holistic relationships.

A Coordinated Solution for an Information-Driven Enterprise

Content is a durable enterprise asset. It's the intellectual property that runs all interactions between an enterprise and the world. Thus, it needs to be treated as an important asset. That is why the people in these practices work in tandem to streamline all the internal costs and effort around content. They also work to power context-ready, modular, and intelligent content elements that are assembled into consumable content to reduce customer effort. Content models, architectures, tags, ontologies, and knowledge graphs alone won't move content without smart people working well together. The people make the content.

The CSO plays a critical role in maintaining shared standards and shared content resources. Once it has good operating rhythms in place, the CSO can facilitate content quality across the portfolio of assets, ensuring that current content meets business goals and that older content gets retired or updated. It can facilitate cross-team practices around privacy, accessibility, and regulatory and legal compliance. The CSO connects and helps unify diverse teams and ways of working.

Today, more senior leaders are investing in cross-functional content organizations because the CSO addresses systemic problems and opportunities in a systematic way. Instituting a CSO goes beyond publishing: It's an excellent way to upgrade the overall intelligence and coherence of an organization built on knowledge—and aren't *all* organizations intelligence-enabled and knowledge-driven?

Conclusion

Wherever it is located in an enterprise, the CSO fills a vital need for creating and maintaining an information-enabled enterprise by aggregating content assets into a common shape and semantically rich form.

These shared core content assets—defined within a common, unified content model—become available through CaaS endpoints that fuel the various consumption channels, functions, and customer experiences. Enterprise content then can be expressed efficiently to address diverse needs across publishing environments.

What we see at [A] is how much progress organizations make when we work together on the long journey toward integrated knowledge sets and focus on empowering global enterprise customer experiences from a single, orchestrated content set.

When publishing functions and content sets exist across many departments, systems, platforms, and people, the CSO acts as the vital facilitation layer to give birth to true content intelligence and intelligent customer experiences.

How will we recognize an information-enabled enterprise? We will recognize them through the fruits of their intelligent customer experiences: unique, assembled, contextually aware, self-learning, evolving, and integrated across diverse content types.

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[A]. n.d. "The Content Order." Accessed 23 January 2021. *https://simplea.com/Treasury/The-Content-Order.*

Baking Bread

BY SHARON BURTON | *STC Associate Fellow*

"I JUST DON'T feel I *understand* bread," I said to my boyfriend, Andy, one cold, inland Southern California January day in 2019. "I know how to make it, but I don't really understand it."

That's how it started. I just wanted to understand bread.

Being a good technical communicator, of course I wanted to understand bread. It's what we do—it's not enough to write about train crossing equipment, we want to *understand* train crossing equipment. We're a curious people, we tech comm folks, and I wanted to understand bread.

Every weekend for months, I made the same loaf of yeast-based bread. The first loaves were not great, but they were fresh bread, and we happily ate them. Finally, around June, I was consistently getting the results I wanted, and they were amazing.

Then I shifted to no-knead, fermented bread, and everything started to go off the tracks.

No-knead, fermented bread uses very little actual yeast and takes 12 to 18 hours to rise. That slow rise is really a fermenting period and adds a deep flavor to the bread that you can't otherwise get. It's the method I use for many of my breads now. It's like shifting from copying and pasting text to automated content reuse—you just can't go back.

For months, I made two loaves every weekend: One for us and one for friends. People started casually asking if I was making bread that weekend. I carried fresh bread into the gym to give to my personal trainer, pied piper to groups of skinny, gluten-free, paleo devotees caught in the fresh bread smell (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Just imagine the fresh bread smell of this delicious-looking loaf. (Photo credit: Andy Schulte.)

"I think I want to learn about sourdough," I said to Andy one August afternoon in 2019, and that's how we left the tracks completely and careened into the wilderness.

Sourdough is based on the wild yeast that grows in your environment. You grow and feed and nurture it to replace store-bought yeast in your breads. It's how bread was made for hundreds (thousands?) of years when you couldn't go to the local grocery and buy commercial yeast. You grew your own.

I've grown my own, and her name is Sophia (Figure 2). She's about 18 months old and has a lovely sharp, sour flavor. She lives on the counter in a big bucket, and I feed her daily. Sophia can, if we could travel, live in the refrigerator for up to 10 days between feedings.

Using store-bought yeast, I've also been working on mastering ciabatta bread and French bread. My baguettes are turning out well,

Figure 2. Sophia, my sourdough starter. (Photo credit: Andy Schulte.)

but I'm not yet satisfied with my ciabatta. It's a complex bread with exacting steps.

Do I understand bread now, as I start my third year of weekly bread baking? A little. Enough that I have two loaves of sourdough with aged cheddar and garden-grown jalapeño peppers in the oven on the proofing setting. They're still on the first rise, after fermenting overnight on the counter. It's my recipe, based on what I know and the results I want. And the house smells amazing.

There is so much more to learn, I may have years before I really *understand* bread.

SHARON BURTON *(sharontechwriter@gmail.com) works remotely for Expel as a senior content strategist. In her spare time, she knits, sews, cooks, grows food, bakes bread, and rides her bike or—pandemic allowing—goes to the gym. Two nights a week, Sharon co-teaches baby engineers to communicate at the University of California, Riverside with fellow teacher Bonni Gonzalez.*

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